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**DEPICTING THE INCARNATION: THEODORE THE STUDITE AND
ENGELBERT MVENG ON THE PARTICULARITY AND UNIVERSALITY OF
CHRIST**

A thesis by Okê Marien Robert Gbèdolo, S.J.

presented to

The faculty of the

Jesuit School of Theology

of Santa Clara University

in partial fulfilment of the


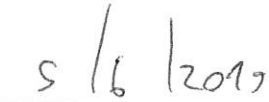
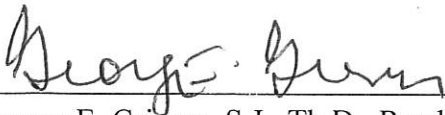
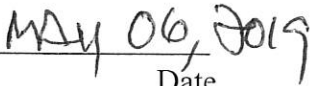
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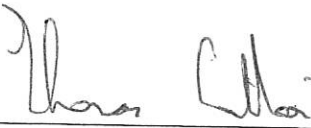
	
Thomas Cattoi, Ph.D., Director	5 / 6 / 2019
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George E. Griener, S.J., Th.D., Reader	Date

ABSTRACT

The Second Vatican Council calls for the inclusion of diverse cultures into the life of the Church (*Gaudium et Spes*, nn.53-62). This thesis explores the implications of this call in the field of iconography. It wishes to claim that iconographic contextualization does not jeopardize the universality of the Church, but it enriches its catholicity. To appreciate the dialectic between particularity and universality, I put in dialogue the iconology of Theodore the Studite (759-826) and the iconography of Engelbert Mveng (1930-1995).

Although the two theologians do not belong to the same period, they share an equal eagerness to defend religious images against iconoclasts. Resorting to the notion of “the circumscribability of the Eternal Logos” developed by Theodore, the research brings the iconophile apologetic of Theodore in conversation with the depiction of Jesus as the *Master of Initiation* by Mveng. Thus, I evaluate the process through which the uncircumscribed God becomes visible in artwork. In so doing, this study discovers the notion of ‘likeness’ in which the relationship “Prototype-Icon” is bound. For Theodore, it is in the likeness that the Begotten Son can be represented in the icon in such a way that the particularity of his icon reveals his universality. Therefore, we approach the African colors and forms in Mveng’s Christological iconography to assert that the analogy of the *Master of initiation* can serve as a universal approach to the circumscribed transcendence of Christ.

Overall, this Christological research joins an ongoing dialogue in the Church that welcomes the diversity of cultures to enrich the icons veneration.


Thomas Cattoi, Ph.D., Director

5 / 6 / 2019
Date

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My gratitude is great to Professor Thomas Cattoi, who accepts and supervises this thesis. As the Director, he uplifts my apprenticeship to a better level in the Christological debate. Not only does his support help me achieve my project, but also his publications on the broader topic have been valuable resources. To Professor George Griener, the Reader, I might say how salvific our interactions have been for this thesis. His openness to the diversity of cultures and his honest challenges keep my research alive. I owe him a debt (Rom 13:8). For he encourages me at the time of a major loss in my life this year. My redaction has required the editorial sacrifices of Ms. Laura M. Dunn. She has done a meticulous wonder. May she be blessed! On Editors, there is one more name: Michael Tyrrell, S.J. In his person, God has sent me “The Good Samaritan” throughout these two years. These four academic sponsors symbolize the erudite, diverse, generous and ‘social-avant-gardist’ faculty and staff that constitutes the Jesuit School of Theology and the Graduate Theological Union communities of Berkeley. I have grown within it.

Now, I rely on the Eternal Savior, to be my *Master of Initiation*, and to avail my heart to serve Him and my sisters, brothers and the creation with the same generosity that I was given during this Licentiate in Sacred Theology program.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
FIGURES	vi
DEDICATION	vii
GENERAL INTRODUCTION.....	2
CHAPTER I: THE BYZANTINE ICONOCLAST CRISES AND THEIR ECHOES IN CURRENT CHURCH LIFE.....	10
Introduction.....	10
1.1- The Byzantine iconoclast controversies.....	11
1.1.1- The political rationale behind iconoclasm at the eighth and ninth centuries	12
1.1.2- The forbidden image.....	16
1.1.3- Matter: Image and Prototype	20
1.2- The echo of the Byzantine iconoclasm in the Church's later life	25
1.2.1- The Reception of the Nicene <i>Acta</i> in the West or the <i>Libri Carolini</i> ..	26
1.2.2- The icon breaking at the Reformation	30
1.2.3- The resistance to inculturation of sacred image	33
Conclusion	37

CHAPTER II: THE ICONOPHILE THEOLOGY OF THEODORE THE STUDITE	
.....	41
Introduction.....	41
2.1- Genealogy of Theodore the Studite's theories.....	42
2.1.1- Theodore the Studite's life and work	43
2.1.2- Maximos the Confessor's Christocentricity	47
2.1.3- John Damascene's defense of the images.....	50
2.2- The iconophile theology of Theodore the Studite.....	54
2.2.1- The Christology of Theodore the Studite	55
2.2.2- The relationship between the image and the prototype	60
2.2.3- The role of the icon.....	62
Conclusion	64
CHAPTER III: ENGELBERT MVENG'S CHRIST, THE <i>MASTER OF INITIATION</i>	
.....	66
Introduction.....	66
3.1- The revolutionary Christology of Mveng	67
3.1.1- The life of Mveng	68
3.1.2- The Christological depictions of Mveng	72
3.2- The Master of Initiation or Mveng's Christological Mask	80
3.2.1- The origin of the Master of Initiation analogy for Christ	81

3.2.2- The heritage of the concept by Mveng	87
Conclusion	90
CHAPTER IV: Mveng's <i>Master of Initiation</i> Depiction in the light of Theodore the Studite's Christology	92
Introduction.....	92
4.1- Through corporeity to the divine	93
4.1.1- The symbolism	93
4.1.2- The shapes	97
4.2- <i>Hekima Christus</i> : Jesus as an Initiatory Master	105
4.2.1- <i>Hekima Christus</i> assessment	106
4.2.2- Christological relevance of <i>Hekima Christus</i> : Christ the Mediator for Social Justice.....	110
Conclusion	115
GENERAL CONCLUSION	116
BIBLIOGRAPHY	121
Theodore the Studite	121
Engelbert Mveng.....	121
Other important literature	122
Secondary literature	123

FIGURES

Figure 1. Mveng, <i>The Double Dialectic</i> or <i>The Virgin and the Child</i> , 1964. Cover of <i>L'Art d'Afrique Noire</i>	1
Figure 3. Mveng, <i>Mural</i> , 1990. Holy Angels Catholic Church in Chicago (USA).	9
Figure 4. Mveng, <i>Nunc Dimittis</i> , 1966. In <i>Lève-Toi, Amie, Viens</i> , V.	40
Figure 5. Mveng, <i>Dan Mask</i> , 1980. In <i>L'Art et l'Artisanat Africains</i> , 90.	65
Figure 6. Sanon, <i>Social Dynamism of Initiation</i> , 1982. From <i>Enraciner dans l'Evangile</i> , 126.....	82
Figure 7. Sanon, <i>Consecration</i> , 1982. In <i>Enraciner dans l'Evangile</i> , 112.	83
Figure 8. Engelbert Mveng, <i>Hekima Christus</i> , 1988. Hekima University College Chapel, Nairobi (KENYA).	91
Figure 9. Mveng, <i>Laws of Aesthetic Creation</i> , 1964. In <i>L'Art d'Afrique Noire</i> , 55....	98
Figure 10. Mveng, <i>Radical Synthesis</i> , 1964. In <i>L'Art d'Afrique Noire</i> , 99.	101
Figure 11. Mveng, <i>Kola Cross</i> or <i>Cosmic Cross</i> , 1964/1967. In <i>L'Art d'Afrique Noire</i> , 64; and <i>Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?</i> , Appendix 19.	103
Figure 12. Mveng, <i>The Barb</i> , 1964. In <i>L'Art d'Afrique Noire</i> , 65.	104

DEDICATION

To my dad,

Who passed away a few months ago.

He was deeply rooted in African medicinal plants wisdom.



Figure 1. Mveng, *The Double Dialectic* or *The Virgin and the Child*, 1964. Cover of *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The use of artwork in religious spheres varies significantly according to specific spiritualities. Buddhist, Hindu, Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, for instance, have different ways to express their aesthetical experiences and relationships to images. For the Christian tradition, the doctrinal acceptance and official introduction of icons in the church life occurred through successive crises. These tensions bear the name of the ‘Iconoclastic Controversy’. They arose twice during the Patristic Period, from 726-780 and 814-843, and then re-emerged during the time of the Reformation.¹ Even after the Second Vatican Council, the reaction towards artistic representations of Jesus remains controversial. Thomas Lucas overviews it in this way:

The history of the use of images in the Roman Catholic tradition is complicated. It has seen three great tidal ebbs and flows: the Iconoclastic crises of the eighth and ninth centuries that rocked both East and West; the ‘bare ruined choirs’ of the Reformation period; and the fervent if short-lived embrace of unornamented modernist architecture that coincided almost exactly with the Second Vatican Council.²

During the second phase of the first crisis, a fervent defender of icons, Theodore the Studite (759-826), arose. He was a Byzantine monk. His unflagging opposition to iconoclasts, following in the footsteps of his master John Damascene and the Christology

¹ Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "A Note on The Iconoclastic Controversy: Greek and Latin Disagreements About Matter and Deification", *Andrews University Seminary Studies* XVIII, no. 2 (1980): 139-40.

² Thomas M. Lucas, "Out of the White Box and Back to Imagery: Post-Vatican II Iconoclasm and Beyond" in *Icons and the Liturgy, East and West. History, Theology, And Culture*, ed. Nicholas Denysenko (Chicago: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 36.

of Maximos the Confessor and others, provided a strong foundation for the emancipation of the arts in the life of Christianity, despite later resurgences of iconoclasm.

In the wake of the iconoclast crisis noted by Lucas, we witness the emergence of multiculturalism in the post-Vatican II Church, as well as the development of a vast collection of modern Christian art. It is in this context that the iconophile theology of Theodore the Studite and other iconic apologists become relevant to our study. The search to establish a theological meeting – between the medieval and contemporary iconophiles – constitutes the birth of this dissertation.

Specifically, this dissertation intends to set in dialogue the iconophile doctrine of the eighth century theologian Theodore the Studite and the twentieth century Christian artist Engelbert Mveng who lived from 1930 to 1995. Mveng was a Cameroonian Jesuit priest who stood up against French and British colonial powers, was instrumental in their collapse and in Africa's political independencies, and worked for the revival of African theologies in the Second Vatican Council and the First African Synod.

Post-Vatican II theologies propose many analogies that present portrayals of the *Symbol of God*,³ Jesus, as the *Crucified Guru*,⁴ and as the *Proto-Ancestor*,⁵ to mention just a few. For Mveng, the Christological analogy is the *Master of Initiation*. The *Master of Initiation* corresponds to the *Sini* and *sub-Saharan* cultural title bestowed on the chief-elder

³ Cf. Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol Of God* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999).

⁴ Cf. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).

⁵ Cf. Bénédet Bujo, *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation* (Nairobi: St. Paul Publications, 1990).

who teaches and introduces young boys, and girls to some extent, to adult social life. This title has been ascribed to Jesus by Anselm Sanon and was adopted by Mveng as a predominant framework of his theological art works.⁶ Consistently, Mveng depicts Jesus with this specific reference: in his *Stations of the Cross and Resurrection*; in the altarpiece *The Uganda's Martyrs* on the back of Collège Libermann Chapel in Douala (Cameroon); on the back of the Hekima College Chapel in Nairobi (Kenya) with the *Hekima Christus* of 1988 (Figure 7); in the 1990 *Mural* of the Holy Angels Catholic Church Chicago (USA); (Figure 2); and many others.⁷

From within and outside these cultural contexts, the movement to develop modern religious art is grounded and growing. It is also perplexing and misunderstood. In front of religious representations or theological reflexions that embody cultural identities, there are still many Asian, Latino, and African Christians that manifest dissatisfaction and rejection

⁶ Anselme Sanon, "Jesus, Master of Initiation" in Robert John Schreiter, *Faces of Jesus in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1991), 85-102.

⁷ The bibliography of Mveng includes also his artworks: *Our Lady of Africa* in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth (Israel), *Lève-toi, Amie, Viens* which is a depiction of Ten mysteries of Jesus' childhood life. His writings can be listed as followed: *Si... quelqu'un... Chemin de croix* (Paris: Mame, 1962) ; *Histoire du Cameroun* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963); *L'art d'Afrique noire: liturgie cosmique et langage religieux*, (Paris, Mame, 1964); *Lève-toi, Amie, Viens* (Dakar, Clairafrique, 1966); *Dossier Culturel Panafricain*, (Paris: Présence africaine, 1966); *Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?* (Rome: Les Amis Italiens de Présence Africaine, 1967); *Introduction à l'Histoire de l'Afrique: l'Afrique noire et le monde antique*, cours à l'Université de Lovanium, (Kinshasa, avril 1967), inédit; "Négritude et civilisation gréco-romaine", dans *Colloque sur la Négritude*, édit. Société Africaine de Culture (S.A.C.), Dakar, 12-17 avril 1971, (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972), p. 43-52; *Les Sources Grecques de l'Histoire Nègro-Africaine, depuis Homère jusqu'à Strabon* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1972); "La Bible et l'Afrique Noire", dans E. MVENG et R.J.Z. WERBLCWSKY (éd.), *Black Africa and the Bible*. L'Afrique noire et la Bible, (Jérusalem, 1972), p. 23-39; "De la soumission à la succession", dans *Civilisation noire et Église catholique*, colloque d'Abidjan, édit. S.A.C., (Paris/Dakar: Présence Africaine/Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1978), p.267-276; *L'art et l'Artisanat africains*, (Yaoundé: CLE, 1980); *L'Afrique dans l'Église. Paroles d'un croyant*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985); "Spiritualité et libération en Afrique", in *Spiritualité et libération en Afrique*, édit. E. MVENG, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987); *Balafon* (Yaoundé: CLE, 1996); "Introduction à l'herméneutique négro-africaine", in *Colloque sur le critique africain et son peuple comme producteur de civilisation*, inédit.

of religious art. They question whether local art matters in Christian lives or theological discourses. This entanglement brings to mind the broader struggle about the legitimacy of Christian artwork that Theodore the Studite once faced and addressed.

In this regard, this thesis participates in the Christological apologetic of icons that encourages their diversity and views in Christological images a special dwelling place of the incarnated Logos. Theodore's iconophile epistemology takes seriously the Chalcedonian doctrine which states the ontological status of Jesus' humanity through the principle of his composite subjectivity without confusion about nor division from his divinity. Chalcedonian doctrine provides answers to two iconoclast arguments.⁸ First, it will respond to Origenism that downplays the possibility for an eschatological redemption of corporality as it appears in matter.⁹ Second, it will address the current critics of religious imagery.

The Studite's iconophile Christology leads us to revisit Engelbert Mveng's practice of Christian art to affirm the latter's claim to the particularity of Christological depiction and to open the possibility to justify his universality. Mveng's theological engagement was dedicated to the inculturation of the Christian faith.¹⁰ This thesis proposes to extend his analogy of Jesus, *The Master of Initiation* to the level of the universalism. The aggiornamento of the Second Vatican Council had something to borrow from Theodore's

⁸ Thomas Cattoi, *Writings on Iconoclasm* (New York: The Newman Press, 2015), 19.

⁹ Origen, *De Principiis* I, 1, 8 (PG 11: 128-30), cited in Cattoi, *ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ Mveng, "The historical background of the African Synod" in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, ed. Maura Browne (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 28.

iconophile argument. Both Theodore and Mveng empowered the artistic revolution that defended the proposition that there is nothing in the Church like a universality that is ahistorical. Universality always emerges from a particularity that speaks to the whole human experience. The icon of Jesus, *The Master of Initiation* belongs to a particular church and makes sense to the universal church.

This dissertation's theological discourse will explore the ontological structure of Christ in the writings of Theodore the Studite. As such, it deploys an analytic process to specifically uncover Theodore the Studite's iconophile ontology of Christ, and to reflect on its epistemological challenge in the wake of a post-Vatican II artist, Engelbert Mveng. My interest in Mveng was born in my direct contact with a collection of his artworks and his writings. My personal experience with his paintings informs a descriptive method as well as my attempt to reconstruct genealogical and archeological methods.¹¹

Genealogy helps the reading of Mveng's work enter into a discussion with his own cultural and religious context. This kind of reading requires a careful openness that views sources as history. In this genealogical method, African arts, like other arts, are plural and complex. The archaeological method pushes our focus beyond the realm of the category of 'africanity', taking me to the second aim of this thesis, which is to bring Mveng's Christology to a broader public. Finally, through this reconstruction, the so-called

¹¹ These methods are suggested by Devin Singh. Cf. Devin Singh, *Divine Currency* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 8-10.

homiletical dimension initiates a renewed image of Jesus, *The Master of Initiation*, as a relevant concept for the church as the universal body of Christ.¹²

Once achieved, my goal will help promote local Christologies embedded in a variety of artistic devotions. Local Christologies are largely unknown beyond their areas of origin. Nonetheless, there has been a real effort to develop relevant images of Christ in all cultures. This thesis contributes to the awareness of such efforts by focusing on one portrayal of Jesus, the *Master of Initiation* by Mveng. The elaboration of this enterprise will be divided into four sections.

The first chapter lays out the fundamental problem of this dissertation. It covers the two major iconoclast controversies of the Patristic period by focusing on the heretical doctrines and subsequent spiritualities. Then it revisits the iconoclast crisis of the twentieth century that precedes the Second Vatican Council. Finally, it explores theological criticism of religious imagery. The main assessment here is that the portrayal in icons as merely human non-transcendental representations – of Christ specifically – has led the Iconoclasts to oppose the particularity of any specific image of Jesus to the universality of the Logos.

The second chapter defends the legacy of Theodore the Studite and his reassertion of Maximos the Confessor and John Damascene's teachings on Christology, affirms the icon's spirituality as a proper way and highest form of Christian relationship with the

¹² Devin Singh, *ibid.*

divine.¹³ Here, the core argument of Theodore mingles the mysterious dialectic of the uncircumscribable divinity and the circumscribable flesh of Christ in the icon.

The third chapter introduces our research with the broader theology of Mveng, but also focuses on his choice to portray Jesus as the *Master of Initiation*. In doing so, we will put ourselves in the path of a faithful disciple who interprets the available materials of the author. The *Master of Initiation*'s prototype is presented as an African Christology.

Our concluding chapter recapitulates our findings: the import of Mveng's Christology in conversation with Theodore's iconophile theology. We establish how the depicted particularity of Christ works to affirm his universality. The *Master of Initiation*, that has been often viewed as a circumscribable analogy in one African context, serves to ascribe the uncircumscribable divinity of Christ and his universality. Here, we will make a necessary move from the iconography of Mveng to his conceptualisation of Jesus, the *Master of Initiation*. This move will allow us to present Christ in a universal homily even though the underlying icon is rooted in African culture.

¹³ Thomas Cattoi, "Picturing Bodies: Sacred Images And Transformative Practice In Byzantium And Tibet", Irdialogue.Org, Last modified 2019, <http://irdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Cattoi-JIRD-Oct-2009.pdf>, 57.



Figure 2. Mveng, *Mural*, 1990. Holy Angels Catholic Church in Chicago (USA).

CHAPTER I: THE BYZANTINE ICONOCLAST CRISES AND THEIR ECHOES IN CURRENT CHURCH LIFE

Introduction

Human history at different places and times has witnessed various forms of attack on images, from antiquity to today, indiscriminately by supporters of particular religions, ideologies, cultures, and politics. The consistent destruction of artwork has complexified the meaning of the term *iconoclasm*. For the Church of the Patristic Period, the most relevant example remains the so-called Byzantine iconoclast controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries. What appears to be a Christian dispute of the Byzantine era should also be understood in terms of the pagan and Jewish attitudes about images. Indeed, Byzantine civilization constituted a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe. Thus, it builds a Graeco-Roman culture.

Christian controversies over images, overall, question the wisdom of the First Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) not to amalgamate the authenticity of the faith with the necessary cultural particularity of any given milieu. What started the iconic crisis was the politico-religious determination of iconoclast bishops and emperors to eradicate Greek iconography.¹⁴

¹⁴ Leslie Barnard, "The Theology of Images" in *Iconoclasm: Papers Given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, eds. Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin, (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1977), 7.

Answering the central questions of “Where is the holy? What belongs to it and what does not?”¹⁵ has generated divisive doctrines between *pro* and *contra* icons. While we reserve the next chapter to the *orthodox* group, in this chapter we intend to study the Christological arguments of the *contra* icons – i.e. the iconoclast doctrine. We are going to revisit these iconoclasts’ arguments, first in the Byzantine era, and second during the following periods, from the Middle-Age to our time.

1.1- The Byzantine iconoclast controversies

Iconoclasm is defined as the aversion towards images and other forms of artistic representations that leads to their destruction. During the Patristic era, it stands for the rejection, the condemnation, and the destruction of icons based upon the belief that they belong to the profane world, and thus cannot be holy. However, *stricto sensu*, Byzantine image-destroyers do not repudiate all icons. Peter Brown observes that:

For the Iconoclasts, there were only three such objects: the Eucharist, which was both given by Christ and consecrated by the clergy; the church building, which was consecrated by the bishop; the sign of the Cross. This last was not only a traditional sacramental gesture, whose power was shown in the rite of exorcism; for an eighth-century Byzantine, it was a sign given directly by God to men, when it first appeared in the sky to the Emperor Constantine.¹⁶

¹⁵ Peter Brown, "A Dark-Age Crisis: Aspects of The Iconoclastic Controversy", *The English Historical Review* 88, no. 346 (1973): 8.

¹⁶ Peter Brown, *ibid.*, 5. On the Eucharistic theology of iconoclast, see also Kenneth Parry, *Depicting the Word: Byzantine Iconophile Thought of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 178–90.

With this understanding on iconoclast selection, we can grasp what happened. Political and philosophical iconoclast considerations emboldened religious disputes and led to a differentiation between the image and its prototype.

1.1.1- The political rationale behind iconoclasm at the eighth and ninth centuries

Political, economic and social influences combined to generate what history records as the iconoclastic controversy of the Byzantine period. This Eastern issue becomes even more amplified as a result of the Latin response. These theological disagreements tend to get lost between the back-and-forth movement from the Byzantine rulers, in the East, to Charlemagne's court and the pontifical states, in the West. Prior to this, icons had been held as protectors of Christian faith from invasion and as symbols of identity during persecutions. One can link this belief to the early apostolic community where even the symbol of a fish was enough to point to Christ. Likewise, catacombs bore signs and drawings of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and numerous martyrs as early as in the third century.¹⁷

During his short reign in Byzantium, Philippikos Bardanes (711-13) did not favour the anti-Monothelite Sixth Ecumenical Council decisions. He deposed one of its defenders, Germanos, the bishop of Kyzikos. Emperor Philippikos was of Armenian origin and was thus inclined toward Monothelitism. This doctrine claims that in Christ, although there are two natures, human and divine, there is only one will – the divine will – that prevails.

¹⁷ George Ostrogorski, *Studies of the History of the Struggle over Icons in Byzantium* (München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1952), 15.

Philippikos then officialised Monothelitism, and with it, he seduced provincial bishops.¹⁸ He ordered the destruction of the images of Christ and the Council, which had always been hung on the imperial palace gate at Chalke. He then replaced those images with the effigy of Sergius, founder of Monothelitism.¹⁹ This would be known as the ‘Chalke Christ’. This move awoke the suspicions of Germanos who, meanwhile, was placed on the seat of the Constantinople patriarchate. After the assassination of Philippikos, Anastasius III, the new ruler was friends with the patriarchate. As such, he restored the Sixth Council legacy, replaced the Chalke Christ and reprimanded iconoclast bishops. Germanos was worried that pagans, Jews and Arabs, might use the pretext of the veneration of ‘hand-made’ artworks to accuse Christian worship as idolatrous. For Cyril Mango, “considering the fact that icons had for a long time been part of Christian life, their rejection would amount to an admission that the church had been in error – a precedent that would have the most disastrous consequences.”²⁰ From this argument on, iconoclastic controversies have been viewed by many scholars as the result of a quest for uniformity or the fear of disunity by both iconophile and iconoclast. The latter feared a military weakening of the Byzantine civilisation amid Islamic expansion. The former feared the loss of the rich Christian

¹⁸ Cyril Mango, "Historical Introduction" in *Iconoclasm*, eds., A. Bryer and J. Herrin (Birmingham, Eng., 1977), 1-6

¹⁹ Filip Ivanović, *Symbol & Icon* Eugene, (Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 34.

²⁰ Cyril Mango, *ibid.*, 1.

tradition, especially the Byzantine iconic heritage. Unity and fear were the crystallizing points of this period, despite their underlining ontological contradictions.²¹

According to Cyril Mango,²² serious clashes started with Leo III's ascension to the throne (717-741).²³ He was of Syrian origin not far from the Arab frontier. In 718, Constantinople was attacked but stood firm and defeated the Asian invasion.²⁴ Because this happened on the feast of the Dormition, everybody interpreted in this victory a heavenly intervention. However, opinions regarding the source of this perceived divine grace differed. Germanos the Patriarch attributed this to Mary, the *Theotokos*, while the emperor attributed the victory to the Cross (which was at that moment a concept without any incarnational load).²⁵

Enmities worsened in the summer of 726 when iconoclast friends of the emperor interpreted the tremendous violence in the Aegean Sea as divine punishment for the Christians' idolatry. Thus, Leo III decreed that veneration of portraits of Christ and the saints be abolished, and any resistance to the emperor's decree was crushed. In 741 his

²¹ Thomas F. X Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc., 2012), 73-74, 77-81, 102. Read also Jaś Elsner, "Iconoclasm as Discourse: From Antiquity to Byzantium", *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 3 (2012): 368-394, doi:10.1080/00043079.2012.10786048.

²² Cyril Mango, "Historical Introduction", *ibid.*, 1-6.

²³ Daniel J. Sahas claims to the contrary that one cannot set a beginning date to the controversy. He writes: "There is no consensus as to when iconoclasm officially began. Iconoclasm must be seen more as a comprehensive and complex phenomenon than an isolated incident in Byzantine history. There is sufficient agreement, however, that the first Byzantine Emperor to take an official position against the icons was Leo III the Isaurian". See: Daniel J Sahas, *Icon And Logos Sources In Eighth-Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 24.

²⁴ Cyril Mango, *ibid.*, 17.

²⁵ Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 314-15; 320-21.

successor, Constantine, reinforced and intensified these policies for thirty-four years. In 754, Constantine summoned the Council at Hieria, which anathematized many iconodules and proscribed their theology. Preeminent iconophiles got sanctioned by Leo III, such as John Damascene and the Patriarch Germanos, who among the ecclesiastic hierarchy had been defending iconodule legitimacy. Leo IV, the successor of Constantine, showed less interest in the religious restriction on image veneration. Irene, his widow, convoked the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 and re-established devotion to icons. But this tranquillity did not last when Leo V took power in 813. For forty years, he and his successors, Michael II and Theophilos, re-imposed Leo III's decree. Light rose from that dark period when "in 843 Theodora, regent for the young Michael III, called a synod at Constantinople which restored the veneration of images, in what later Byzantines celebrated as the Triumph of Orthodoxy."²⁶

We can distinguish, therefore, two major phases of the iconoclast controversy in the patristic period: the one of the eighth century (726-780) and the second of the ninth century (814-843). Yet, the theological debates hold the same concern and argument more or less. The military equilibrium of the Byzantine empire, entangled between Rome and the Persian peninsula, relied on the support and generalisation of iconoclast theology – that was rather an iconoclast philosophy. From the lighting of the candle to the kissing of saints' images or the kneeling before a statue, an iconoclast theorisation had been developed that lasted through the sixth to the ninth centuries, and which did not hang on the only Jewish

²⁶ Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *ibid.*, 140.

scriptural image prohibition, nor the ambiguous attitude of apostles towards representations.²⁷

Philosophic influences on the aniconic theologies can be found with the Greek philosophers Anaximander, Xenophanes, and Plato. Indeed, for Anaximander what has no limit and no confinement – known as the *archē* – is the divine or the *apeiron*. For Xenophanes, Homer’s description of the gods is a mere anthropomorphism and a pretention of knowing how they look like. For Plato, God is beyond the world.²⁸ In one way or another, these three Greek philosophers, and others founded a lasting school which believes that the divine being cannot be imprisoned in the physical being.

1.1.2- The forbidden image

Neither iconoclasts nor iconophiles intended to dishonor the persona Christi. His Real Presence in the Eucharist was not doubted. The dispute was in regard to whether the prototype that is Christ himself is equal to the image as its referent expression. Because of the centrality of Christology since the Council of 325, the pendulum of the arguments swings from ontology to epistemology, from the theoretical notion of Christ’s identity to

²⁷ Exodus 20:4 “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.” Psalm 115: 3-5 stresses on the dichotomy between God and Idols, saying: “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, The work of man’s hands. They have mouths, but they cannot speak; They have eyes, but they cannot see”. (NIV)

We see such a rebuke underscored in St. Paul’s encounter with Greek idols at Iconium and Athens (Acts 4: 16). He invites the Athenians to abandon the lifeless icons (three dimensioned images) made of human hands and to believe in Jesus-Christ, in whose name he is performing miracles.

²⁸ Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 18-28.

experimental knowledge of Him.²⁹ The same methodological shift will eventually be made by defenders of icons, like Theodore the Studite, as we will later acknowledge.

Although much of the decrees of the Council of Hieria in 754 are lost, the theological arguments of the iconoclasts can be found therein.³⁰ The iconoclast assembly situates their condemnation of idolatry within the context of Lucifer's deception of Christians.³¹ For them, icons artists and devotees are guilty of blasphemy.³² The conciliar attention focuses on the icon of Christ – perhaps the Chalke Christ, which was the first instance of image-breaking – in response to John Damascene's iconodule Christology.

Damascene's argument was based on Christ's nature as being both 'divine and human' and was used against him to state that blasphemy is the confusion and/or circumscription of the Godhead. Describing created flesh, "the painter has either circumscribed the uncircumscribable character of the Godhead or he has confused that unconfused union falling into the iniquity of confusion."³³ Furthermore, under the penalty of Nestorianism – the doctrine of two separate persons in the Incarnated Logos as opposed to the concept of hypostatic union in Christ – the Council of Hieria condemns iconography and iconophile

²⁹ It is important to mention that the ontological justification of the breaking of icons exempts the *acheiropoieton* (image not made by human hands): such as the gift of Christ's face on Veronica's cloth (Luke 8:43-48), the Mandylion or the shroud that wrapped the body of Jesus in the tomb (John 20:6-7). Read also: Jas Elsner, "Iconoclasm As Discourse: From Antiquity To Byzantium", *ibid.*, 378.

³⁰ *Acta* of the Council of Nicaea, I. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio* etc., XIII (Florence, 1767), 208C-356D.

³¹ Mansi, 221D.

³² *Ibid.*, 240C, 254D.

³³ Jas Elsner, *ibid.*, 379.

revelation.³⁴ Commenting on this double bind, the author Jas Elsner writes: “Either [iconophile believers] think ‘that the divinity is circumscribable and confused with the flesh’ (a heresy and a blasphemy) or they think ‘that the body of Christ was without divinity and divided,’ and hence they worship only the image of the flesh (also a heresy and a blasphemy).”³⁵ We can summarize the view of the aniconic council in this way: Only the Eucharist is the true icon; the rest are heretical because they lack the apostolic certification.³⁶

Once the icon of Christ gets dismissed, the icons of the Virgin Mary and other Saints logically fall under the same injunction without further argumentation. One would need to hear more from the Hiereia assembly, considering that the other icons do not possess the double nature of divine and human as Christ. Perhaps the iconoclast assembly provided an elaboration of the issue, but since the large part of their *Acta* was not preserved, this remains unclear.³⁷

It is significant to realize how the Christological conclusion of the Cappadocian Fathers’ debate on Christ’s ontology as the medium to render the effectiveness of his *descent* is now being used as an epistemological device to forbid the created image from

³⁴ *Mansi*, 256C.

³⁵ Jas Elsner, *ibid.*, 179. See also *Mansi*, 269AB.

³⁶ *Mansi*, 261E-64C.

³⁷ On the non-preservation of the *Acta* of the Council of Hiereia, Jas Elsner writes: “The worries of the iconoclast Council of St. Sophia in 815 about the images of saints, and the attempt there (so far as we can trust our exiguous sources, themselves excerpts from Patriarch Nicephorus’s refutation of this council’s deliberations) to justify the rejection of icons of holy personages, perhaps hint that the Council of 815 saw Hiereia as having somewhat fudged this issue. See (rather obscurely) Paul J. Alexander, *The Patriarch Nicephorus of Constantinople* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 44–45 in Elsner, *ibid.*, note 118, page 392.

being used to *ascend* to God. For the Council of Hiereia, the Godhead, which is the uncircumscribed essence (*katanoēsai*), cannot be imprisoned in an anthropomorphic way, nor adored, neither in a church nor in a personal house.³⁸

Despite its anathemizing rhetoric, the Council of Hiereia, fearing expropriation by avid opportunists, applied cautions. The iconophile Second Council of Nicaea that follows, mocks their inconsistency.³⁹ The conciliar Assembly of Hiereia decreed:

At the same time we ordain that no one in charge of a church or pious institution shall venture, under pretext of destroying the error in regard to images, to lay his hands on the holy vessels in order to have them altered, because they are adorned with figures. The same is provided in regard to the vestments of churches, cloths, and all that is dedicated to divine service. However, should anyone, strengthened by God, wish to have such church vessel and vestments altered, he must do this only with the assent of the holy Ecumenical patriarch and at the bidding of our pious Emperors. So also no prince or secular official shall rob the churches, as some have done in former times, under the pretext of destroying images.⁴⁰

These lines indicate that the iconoclast theologians do not intend the effective destruction of images like iconoclast activists would, but the interdiction of the new production of artworks. Furthermore, they substantiate the premise that the Hiereia rejection of material icons invites the Christian to rather print the true image of the saint's virtue in herself/himself as a living icon, as one already does by eating the Eucharist that transforms one's body and gives life.⁴¹ But still, if what matters depends only on the immaterial relationship with the holy, the hypothetic inner world, then iconoclasm holds

³⁸ *Mansi*, 336E; 337D.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 332C.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 329E-332E.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 264A, 345CD.

the most dangerous spirituality which does not care for a concrete culture, nor envisions its transformation. This is the most harmful impact of the theology against images: the opposition to the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh in a culture. Mveng's engagement to portray a Word in a language that fits in his environment aesthetic suffers ultimately from this hidden Neoplatonism wrapped in the suitable threat of idolatry.⁴² This takes us back to the problematic of the *matter* and how it constructs the iconoclast misrepresentation of the *Image* and the *Prototype* from prior Origenism and Monophysitism. These latter deny the sanctity of matter.

1.1.3- Matter: Image and Prototype

Beside the Judeo-Christian influence on Byzantine iconoclasm, Daniel Sahas claims the Islamic event reverberates in the debates as well.⁴³ The interdiction on icons explicitly lists image and human representation as idolatry. Christians became aware of the Islamic conduct when Caliph Yazid II (720-724), who conquered Christian territories, and ordered "the destruction of all icons found in the Christian churches under his dominion."⁴⁴ For Muhammad's religion, any artist involved in the proscribed activity would be punished at the Last Judgment.⁴⁵

⁴² During the nineteenth century evangelisation of Africa, Mveng notes that the Missionaries told the neophytes that "their African arts belong to Fetishism [i.e. evil religion] ... so much so that for the average Christian today, the African *mask* symbolizes the paganism." In Mveng, "Interview", *Hekima Review*. Vol.1 Nairobi: Hekima College, April 1, 1988, 68. All the citations from this review are my own translation. Read also: Mveng, *L'Afrique dans l'Eglise*, 71.

⁴³ Daniel J. Sahas, *ibid.*, 19-21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

In the church, the genealogy of iconoclasm encompasses a broad variety of authors.⁴⁶ They are to be found among those whom “Patriarch Tarasius of Constantinople named the Hebrews, the Saracens, the Greeks, the Samaritans, the Manichaeans, the Marcionists, the Theopaschites, the Docetists or Fantasiasts, and those who confused the two natures of Christ like Peter Gnapheus, Xenias of Hierapolis, and Severus.”⁴⁷ Indeed, the Neoplatonist debates with Origen around spirit and matter support the viewpoint. Origen inherits the Neoplatonist discomfort with corporeality, which understands that the body and matter cannot be eschatologically preserved. Therefore, any portrayal of Christ’s body or of the saints reverses their status of holiness, rendering such artwork as sinful.

⁴⁶ Other precursors whose specific argument we would not necessarily mention along these lines:

a- Another Pauline view in the Romans: 1:18-23.

b-The *Canon 36* of the Council of Elvira (ca. 300-312)

“Resolved that paintings should not be in church; not to be painted on the walls to be revered and worshipped.” *Mansi*, II, Col. 11, *Concilium Liberitanum*.

c-Epiphanius (ca. 315-413)

“Remembering this... bring no images into the churches nor into the resting places of the saints; but always remember God in your hearts. Neither bring them into your common dwelling; for it becomes not a Christian to be unsettled by the eye or the fancies of the mind”. *Mansi*, II, col.292 D-E.

d-Eusebius (265-340) in his Letter to the Empress Constantia

“Has the Scripture escaped you in which God by law prohibits the making of any likeness, either of things in heaven, or of those on the earth below? Have you ever heard of such a thing in a church or in any other place? Have not such things been banished from the entire Christian community and driven out of our churches? PG 20, col. 1548; *Mansi*, XIII, col. 313 A-D.

e- Amphilochios of Ikonion (ca. 345-403)

“It is not, however, our task to represent the physical form of the saints on slabs with paints, for we have no need of such, but to imitate their manner of life in the way of virtue.” *Mansi*, XIII, col. 301D.

⁴⁷ Daniel J. Sahas, *ibid.*, 19.

Embodiment, in theory, steps away from an authentic integration with God and recalls only our fallen created condition.

Accordingly, Origenism – as an echo of Neoplatonist position on the intrinsic inferiority of the matter – understands that the best of the person resides within the soul and not the body, within the rational mind and not the matter.⁴⁸ From there, Origenism considers the noetic level as the highest, that belongs to the soul and ultimately to God who is the Source. In *De Principiis*, Origen states: “As He himself, then, was the cause of the existence of those things which were to be created, in whom there was neither any variation nor change, nor want of power, he created all whom he made equal and alike, because there was in himself no reason for producing variety and diversity.”⁴⁹ This argument is the basis of iconoclasm and lasts through all generations. God was then understood under the axiom of unchangeability and the uniqueness that extirpates all possibility of images, because images imply change. Today, the same axiom is understood as God’s unchangeability accepts only one universalized image of God.

One more point with Origenism consists in the specificity and supremacy of the human being as an intelligent creature who can redeem his corporality through his rationality using ascetic life in virtues and the contemplation of the Logos.⁵⁰ This last call for virtuous commitment is an important step in Origen’s schema that most Origenists and

⁴⁸ Charly Clard, *Les Theories relatives au culte des images chez les auteurs grecs du IIe siècle après Jésus-Christ* (Paris : Fontemoing and Cie, 1915) 24-30; 46-62.

⁴⁹ Origen, “De Principiis”, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 4. eds. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL. D. (Peabody, Ma: Hendrickson, 1994), 292.

⁵⁰ Origen, “De Principiis”, *ibid.*, 292.

iconoclasts who rely on Origen fail to emphasize. The iconoclasm theory revolves around matter. “This contempt for matter”, writes Christoph Schönborn, “is one of the most striking traits of iconoclasm. While other arguments underwent profound changes over the 120 years of the image controversy, this one remained constant.”⁵¹

Leo III rejects the icon because it symbolizes lifelessness. He does not provide theological arguments to corroborate his position, which rather seems to serve political purposes. Epiphanius (d 403), bishop of Salamis in Cyprus and other bishops of Asia Minor, whom Iconoclasts instrumentalize as the source of patristic rejection of icons did much the same.⁵² But the son of Leo III, Constantine V, presents more serious arguments. “Every image is the copy of an original,” he says. “In order to be true image, it has to be consubstantial with what is depicted ... so that the whole be safeguarded; otherwise, it is not an image.”⁵³ He was a man of more conviction on matters of faith, especially of the icon of Christ. If the icon of Christ cannot be justified, neither can any other icon. Based on the Council of 754, Constantine retorts that “an icon depicting Christ is actually an icon of Christ, because Christ is of two natures brought together in one unconfused union. Thus, in painting an icon of Christ, the painter either divides or confuses the two natures, since according to Constantine, every Icon... is of the same substance with the subject depicted on it.”⁵⁴ Although Constantine recalls the Chalcedonian notion of ‘unconfused two natures

⁵¹ Christoph Schönborn, *God's Human Face*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 151.

⁵² Daniel J Sahas, *Icon and Logos Sources In Eighth-Century*, 22.

⁵³ Christoph Schönborn, *ibid.*, 157.

⁵⁴ Daniel J Sahas, *ibid.*, 31.

in Christ', he develops a predisposition to monophysitism, the blending of the two natures in Christ. His view challenges the impossibility to portray the person of Christ and to describe his divinity in the same artwork. His tenacious conclusion results in severe persecutions for the iconodule until the Council of 787 undoes the affirmations of the Council of 754 and canonizes the theology of John Damascene.

The iconoclast Christology misunderstands the notion of enhypostasis. According to Leontios, this notion means that the concept of nature is not abstractive and without reality. He states: "There is no nature without hypostasis."⁵⁵ John Meyendorff mentions how iconoclasm uses the Chalcedonian apophaticism and pushes the theory of *communicatio idiomatum* to its extreme.⁵⁶ The concept of *communicatio idiomatum* is a Christological concept that explains how the divine and human natures of Christ interact with each other. The notion means that the properties (*idiomata*) of the divine Logos are ascribed to the man Jesus, and that the properties of the man Jesus are predicated of the Logos, in such a way that the one Jesus-Christ is "perfect God and man, consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with man."⁵⁷ In 451, the definitive adoption of *communication idiomatum* concept helps the Council of Chalcedon to formulate the

⁵⁵ PG 86:1280B.

⁵⁶ Mansi, XIII, col. 253 ab, cited by John Meyendorff, *Christ In Eastern Christian Thought*, 2nd ed. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 181.

⁵⁷ P. T. Camelot, "Chalcedon, Council of" in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. 2nd ed. (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2003), 365.

doctrine of the hypostatic union of two distinct natures of Christ while maintaining the unity of Christ's person.⁵⁸

Despite that formulation, iconoclasts misuse the *communicatio idiomatum* notion to serve their purpose. John Meyendorff cites them, saying:

The divinity of the Son having assumed the nature of the flesh into its own hypostasis, the [human] soul [of Christ] became the intermediary between the divinity and the thickness of the flesh; therefore, the soul is also the soul having been deified as well as the body, and divinity remaining inseparable from the one as well as from the other, wherever the soul of Christ is, there is the divinity; and where the body of Christ is, there also is the divinity; [and this applies] even to the very moment when the soul [of Christ] separated itself from the body in the voluntary passion.⁵⁹

To support their argument, iconoclasts appeal to the impossibility of consubstantiality between the celestial beings and their models that we have evoked earlier. The image crises would be summarized under this question: How do we vision the invisible?⁶⁰ The next generations of Christians inherit from this controversy.

1.2- The echo of the Byzantine iconoclasm in the Church's later life

From what we have seen so far, the iconoclast debate took place largely in Eastern Christendom. To study its repercussions hundreds of years in the Reformation and the stream leading to Vatican II, we need to grasp briefly how Western Christendom welcomed

⁵⁸ Donald L. Gelpi, S. J. *The Firstborn of Many, A Christology for Converting Christians, Vol. 1, To Hope in Jesus Christ*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), p. 124.

⁵⁹ John Meyendorff, *Christ In Eastern Christian Thought*, *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 173.

and digested the ‘Triumph of the Orthodoxy’ theses – the end of the Byzantine iconoclast crises in 843 – and the florescence of Christian aesthetic in the Medieval.

1.2.1- The Reception of the Nicene *Acta* in the West or the *Libri Carolini*

The iconoclast controversy seemed to have been solved in the East. Still, the controversy continued to turmoil the West because of the way the written Byzantine resolutions were handed over to Rome and allies. The decrees of the Council of Nicaea 787, or the Nicene *Acta*, reached the papal library of Pope Adrian I immediately after the council and were poorly translated into Latin, even though that first translation was qualified as “a worthy, permanent memorial of the orthodox faith.”⁶¹ Another version of the decrees by Anastasius Bibliothecarius was issued under the pontificate of John VIII.⁶² Other translations were also circulating. The one that finally reached Charlemagne’s hands and was passed on to the English throne was either one of the inaccurate, unofficial versions or the first flawed Latin version by Adrian I. Historians are confused about the transmission into the political arena: both its contents and its sender.⁶³

Charlemagne consulted his trusted collaborator Alcuin or Theodulf, a later bishop of Orléans, who wrote a critical response to the Nicene *Acta*. This massive work took the

⁶¹ *Libri Pontificalis*, I, 152.

⁶² PL 129:195B–512B.

⁶³ For Alain Besançon, Pope Adrian I is the one who sent the inaccurate *Nicaea Acta* to Charlemagne. Read: Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image*. *ibid.*, 151. For Thomas Noble the Latin version wound up in the Franks kingdom under mysterious circumstances. Read, Thomas F. X Noble, *ibid.*, 160.

name of *Libri Carolini* or *Opus*.⁶⁴ It condemns both iconophile and iconoclast and served as a jab from the western emperor to “assert the Carolingian differences and superiorities to Byzantium [...] led by a woman, [that] had clearly strayed from Christian practice”, on the one hand, and, as a response to “the conception of the nature and role of religious image,” on the other hand.⁶⁵

Theodulf’s version of the Latin text led him to believe that the iconodule Byzantine was ascribing the same transcendental qualities of God to images. Probably, the Latin word *adoratio* (adoration) was used in the translation of both the Greek words *latreia* (adoration) and *proskynesis* (veneration). The *Opus* then took the single position that replaces the Nicene notion of *memoria* with the one of *ornamentum*. Besançon writes

One must worship only God. At most, one may, ‘out of courtesy’, and in a gesture inspired by humility, bow before a man, because God loves the human race and created it in his image and likeness. But in relation to images, such an attitude is ‘superstitious and superfluous’. ‘Thus we allow images in the basilicas of saints, not for the purpose of worship but to recall their action and adorn the walls.’⁶⁶

The *Opus* does not consider the holiness of the painter as the Eastern iconographer was expected to pray before his divine mission.⁶⁷ Merely aesthetical engagement separated from the spiritual act defined the new icon theology in the West. One critic of the Byzantine iconophile’s attitude told this story:

⁶⁴ The correct title is *Opus Caroli Regis contra synodum*. Read Alain Besançon, *ibid.*, 151.

⁶⁵ Lis James, “Seeing is believing but words tell no lies: captions versus images in the *Libri Carolini* and Byzantine Iconoclasm”, in *Negating the Image*, ed. Anne L McClanan and Jeffrey Johnson, (London: Routledge, 2016), 98.

⁶⁶ Alain Besançon, *ibid.*, 151.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

He was shown two pictures of beautiful women without captions. The painter supplied one picture with the caption 'Virgin Mary' and the other with the caption 'Venus'. The picture with the caption 'Mother of God' was elevated, venerated and kissed; while the other, because it had the caption 'Venus', was maligned, scorned and cursed, although both were equal in shape and color and made of identical material and differed only in caption.⁶⁸

For the *Opus*, artwork only requires an apprenticeship and can be indiscriminately the result of pious or impious professionals. For the first time, a Christian icon has been described as morally neutral, and the iconograph ceases to be intrinsically the servant of religion. With that said, the Carolingian bishops affirmed that the spiritual life of the iconophile is subject to a context. They “rejected the idea of a *transitus*, a passage between a material form and a divine prototype of a radically different nature.”⁶⁹ And there is no *holy* matter – which is consistent with Origenism. The only *mystērion* that they agreed on, following the teaching of St. Basil of Caesaria, is the Eucharist, the cross, the sacred vessels, and the Scriptures.⁷⁰ It was unprecedented to make the authority of the Church be limited to the chapel rather than extending to the artist’s shop. Western principalities laid down a new challenge to iconophile and iconoclast that justified the growth of religious artwork in the medieval period as well as its increasingly extravagant and costly forms of presentation.

This luxurious type of art in the West was condemned by St. Bernard who banished ornaments from his monasteries and inspired what is called the Cistercian iconoclasm.⁷¹

⁶⁸ *Opus Caroli Regis contra synodum*, IV, 16.

⁶⁹ Alain Besançon, *ibid.*, 152.

⁷⁰ *Opus Caroli Regis contra synodum*, II, 27-30.

⁷¹ Alain Besançon, *ibid.*, 153.

That is the Christianity that the reformers inherit: a lavish Church, freed from the restraints imposed by the Nicene *Acta* and its misinterpretation, and with the blessing of St. Thomas, the Angelic Doctor. Thomas and Thomism impact how the iconic controversy resurges at the time of the Reformation and, indeed, today.

Briefly, Thomas Aquinas, the author of the *Summa*, separates his aesthetical metaphysics from his iconophile theology in a way that leads to the emancipation and also systematization of Christian art.⁷² On the one hand, his criteria of beauty endorse the Aristotelian perspective, hence a dogmatism that may exclude post-Vatican II local aesthetics. On the other, his Augustinian and Damascene iconic theology legitimizes the image as media for our intellect to be turned toward divine beauty. For Aquinas, art (*technē*) is an intellectual virtue that demands prudence by the rational being.⁷³ He despiritualizes the act of making an icon. He said:

Art does not require of the craftsman that his act be a good act, but that his work be good. Rather would it be necessary for the thing made to act well (e.g. that a knife should carve well, or that a saw should cut well), if it were proper to such things to act, rather than to be acted on, because they have not dominion over their actions. Wherefore the craftsman needs art, not that he may live well, but that he may produce a good work of art, and have it in good keeping.⁷⁴

With prudence, the work of art can be pursued for pleasure and playfulness – the Aristotelian *eutrapelia*.⁷⁵ Here, the beautiful is identical to the good and both of them are

⁷² Alain Besançon, *ibid.*, 163.

⁷³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, 2ae, q.57, art.4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Ia, 2ae, q.57, art.5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Ia, 2ae, q.168, art.2.

objectivised. The critics of the Thomistic aesthetic point at his criteria of beauty. He articulates that the pure beauty or pleasure is not one at the level of mere biology but at the spiritual one, which is only reserved to a rational being. He then cites three criteria of iconic beauty based on his trinitarian model: the *integritas* (wholeness), the *debita proportio in consonantia* (harmony of proportions) and the *claritas* (brightness).⁷⁶ This Thomistic iconic blessing and the artistic blooming at the Renaissance come with an unpredicted concerns that ignited Reformation iconoclasm.

1.2.2- The icon breaking at the Reformation

The Nicene *Acta* permitted iconic veneration. The *Libri Carolini* unleashed iconography from the double bind of the solely religious arena and the views of the Byzantine Islamophilic. The medieval Thomism granted theological foundations for the expansion of artwork. One would presume that this was the death of iconoclasm. However, the Reformation disinterred the iconic controversy on the basis of clerics' scandals that had been condemned and unsuccessfully addressed by several councils, especially the Fourth Council of Lateran.⁷⁷ These scandals are: the luxurious lifestyle of the medieval clergy, the abuse of clerical power, the selling of indulgencies in the name of Church buildings and images, and the simony had been addressed by successive councils, especially. They

⁷⁶ Ibid., Ia, q.39, art.8, I, cited in Alain Besançon, *ibid.*, 160.

⁷⁷ Read: Paul Pixton, *The German episcopacy and the implementation of the decrees of the fourth Lateran Council, 1216-1245 : watchmen on the tower* (New York : E.J. Brill, 1995).

intensified Martin Luther's frustrations which led him to publish and distribute his *Ninety-five Theses* and spread the Reformation in Europe in 1517.⁷⁸

The Reformation does not attack the traditional question of idolatry, but instead attacks the use of icons and monuments to increase alms giving, and the Church's waste of economic resources to the detriment of the poor.⁷⁹ The consequences of the Reformation's iconoclasm lasts even today, evidenced in the manner in which art is considered an autonomous secular activity. The incarnational argument that we will see within Theodore's defense and later in Mveng's activity, is absent. According to Werner Hofmann:

[Lutheranism's] assumption that images were not themselves responsible for the uses to which they were put amounted to a liberation, and the expulsion of images from religious services eventually led not only to the flowering of profane art but to Kant's definition of art as the object of 'disinterested enjoyment', to the condemnation of iconoclastic attitude as archaic, and to the establishment of a 'religion of art'.⁸⁰

The Reformation movement critiques the intrinsic value of any sacred image, and asserts that the value of images is dependent upon the interpretation of the viewer. The Holy Communion ceases to be a sacrament once the mass is over. The Reformation under Zwingli and Calvin questions the notion of transubstantiation and prefers to speak of

⁷⁸ Dario Gamboni, *Destruction of Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 29.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Werner Hofmann, "Die Geburt der Moderne aus dem Geist der Religion" in *Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst*, ed. Hofmann, (Hamburger Kunsthalle, Munich, 1983), pp. 46-51, cited by Dario Gamboni, *ibid.*, 30.

consubstantiation.⁸¹ Thus, the Byzantine notion of prototype found its eucharistic paradigm reframed. In the Reformation, icons are neither good nor bad. Nevertheless, they should not be used to divert the faith of Christians, nor to overshadow the immaterial nature of God.⁸² Relics were denounced as overestimated and oversupplied as a commodity by ecclesiastics in order to boost their alms collection.

In England, iconoclasm was discussed in terms of '*econoclasm*'. The definition of the econoclasm can be accessed in this description of Matthew Hunter: "As figures significantly in the commissioners' accounts and the royal proclamations alike, these material encrustations of idolatrous intent can only mean one thing: laxity and poor household management by ecclesiastical authorities."⁸³ The Reformation endorses the iconoclast Byzantine argument that credited the *virtues* of the saints to be the living image. Imitation of saints would be preferred to their representations.⁸⁴

The Puritanism of Calvin led him to seek God directly without any intermediary help, not even from angels, with the understanding that Christ is our only mediator. He felt that the world should not be deified by the mirage of the icons, for God speaks through his

⁸¹ Aura Satz, "Attacks on automata and eviscerated sculptures" in *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms*, Stacy Boldrick and Richard Clay, eds., (Aldershot: Ashgate 2007), 39.

⁸² Dario Gamboni, *ibid.*, 312.

⁸³ Matthew Hunter, "Iconoclasm and consumption; or, household management according to Thomas Cromwell" in *Iconoclasm: contested objects, contested terms*, *ibid.*, 60.

⁸⁴ David Freedberg, "The Structure of Byzantine and European Iconoclasm" in *Iconoclasm: Papers Given At The Ninth Spring Symposium Of Byzantine Studies*, eds. Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin, (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1977), 166.

Word.⁸⁵ And following Eusebius of Caesarea, Calvin condemns the impiety of those who reverse the divine choice that suppresses figurative communication, and instead, gives his Commandments as the true will of the Godhead to contemplate. He declares the impossibility of the human expression to equal the divine wisdom. Later, this incapacity of the human intellect will haunt Kant's position.

In Puritanism, God is present through the Scripture, and all attempts to represent the Sacred run the risk of idolatry. Calvin's Origenism places the Godhead infinitely distant from the cosmos in such way that only a kind of mysticism could fill the gap. The Calvinist condemnation of divine representation still recognizes sculpture and painting as "gift of God" that shall not be perverted to our own destruction.⁸⁶ The Calvinist attitude toward human artwork travelled beyond his time and influence, as we shall see, to numerous European philosophers: Paschal, Hegel, Kant, etc. Their arguments about the use of the image of the divine have exercised indisputable influence on theology ever since.

1.2.3- The resistance to inculturation of sacred image

Logical and passionate research to understand the iconic dialectic produced livid adversity towards religion and permitted destruction of images. But from an artistic development perspective, the culture built in the French Revolution of 1789 and the Enlightenment caused an unpredicted resurgence of neoclassical art and intellectualism.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ John Calvin, *institutes of the Christian Religion*, Trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), 91-103.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁸⁷ Thomas M. Lucas, *ibid.*, 40.

As a result of these unintended consequences, a surrealistic approach to art develops in the late nineteenth century. In this context “iconoclasm” is an odd word to be used. Indeed, with regard to iconography, the Church of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries faces three great challenges: the everlasting remains of the past schisms in Christianized Europe, the growing economy and freedom that suppresses the distinction between the religious and profane arts, and the fight for political independencies in new Christianized countries that thirst for local churches emancipation, especially in Africa and Latin America.

Iconoclasm in that pre-Vatican Second Council context assumes different forms. First, reminiscence of the past iconic controversy keeps the Catholic Church from daring to make reforms that might trigger the critics of the Byzantine iconoclasts and the Reformers. Second, with Dom Prosper Guéranger, it hides itself in the robe of the liturgical movements in Northern Europe of the late nineteenth century that revives the *neo-Gothic style*. In 1912, the archbishop of Cologne forbids the construction of any church building that does not borrow from the neo-Romanesque or Gothic styles.⁸⁸ Third, the pre-Vatican II Church in the non-western world preaches with condescendence and accuses local arts of idolatry. In this regard, we validate the analysis of Dario Gamboni which says that, “the ethnocentric attributions of ‘idolatry’ and ‘primitivism’ ... justify assaults on the material cultures of colonized society, so that [Alain Schnapp] has called Westerners ‘the greatest destroyer of

⁸⁸ Thomas M. Lucas, *ibid.*, 44.

history’ and considers that ‘vandalism characterizes the way in which developed societies have communicated with archaic societies.’”⁸⁹

In the non-Western world, the missionaries exported their civilizational standards and imposed their arts over local populations, with little space for adaptation. The fact that political liberation from the colonialists – and not from their Christian magus – bridges through the Marxist enchantment confuses the continuity with a political iconoclasm. In West Africa, for instance, the destruction of monuments, sacred forest, artistic museums, sociocultural festivals, etc., has been orchestrated in the ante-Vatican II, and sometime in the post-Vatican, era by both the communist politicians and the Romanized priest or the Protestant pastor.⁹⁰ The inflicted damage of such ideologic iconoclasm implies the end of the *Master of Initiation*, the “rupture in the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next... probably forever.”⁹¹ Ramon describes the motif of such vain desire of *de-maraboutization* with this statement:⁹² “In 1957 the iconoclasts cut down sacred bushes [...] expecting the spirit *amanco ngopong* to literally be there. It was not. They demolished

⁸⁹ Dario Gamboni, *ibid.*, 29.

⁹⁰ Cf. Ramon Sarro, “Hermetic huts and modern state: the politics of iconoclasm in West Africa” in *Iconoclasm: Contested Objects, Contested Terms*, eds., Stacy Boldrick, *ibid.*, 261-274.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁹² The *Marabou* is in West African Islamic area the person in charge of magic practices. He is the equivalent of the priest in *Vodun* traditional religion. *Maraboutism* then refers to his consultation by ordinary citizen, in their quest to hear the message of the gods. *De-maraboutization* can be understood, with Ramon Sarro, as the political action to terminate practice of *maraboutism*, viewed here as a barbarity.

hermetic houses hoping, once again to find some secret object or spirit that they could expose in public and get rid of. Again they found nothing.”⁹³

The Enlightenment has set a decisive path for modernity, human freedom and cultural diversity. In 1910, Pope Pius X tries in vain to put its genie back in the bottle with his *Oath Against Modernism*. But resolutely, post-Enlightenment Catholicism calls for the Church renewal, for the Second Vatican Council. More than ever, the Council insufflates a great movement of inclusion that favors iconophile diversity and opens the Church to all the nations. The Church as *Lumen Gentium* (The Light of the Nations) becomes the charism that integrates and celebrates the plurality of icons.

The Second Vatican Council’s call for inclusion (*Gaudium et Spes*, nn.53-62) was welcomed with an iconophile engagement among the large majority of the faithful. Mveng’s artworks stands as one example. However, a minority of right-wing theologians – such as Cardinals Ottaviani, Siri, and Ruffini, and Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre – resists to the *aggiornamento* of the Council. Out of the need for social engagement towards a culturally diverse arts, there is also the nostalgia of the past.⁹⁴ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger talks of “a flight into historicism, the copying of the past or else attempting a compromise,

⁹³ Ramon Sarro, *ibid.* 273.

⁹⁴ Shaun Blanchard, “The Minority Report at Trent and the Vatican Councils: Dissenting Episcopal Voices as Positive Sources for Theological Reflection” in *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 98, Issue 1074 (Wiley Subscription Service: March 2017), 147-156. Read also: Giuseppe Alberigo, the Conciliar *Acta* or Philippe Roy-Lysencourt, *Les Membres du Coetus Internationalis Patrum au Concile Vatican II: Inventaire des Interventions et Souscriptions des Adherents et Sympathisants, Liste des Signataires d'occasion et des Théologiens*, Instrumenta Theologica 37 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014).

[the Church] losing itself in resignation and cultural abstinence.”⁹⁵ This post conciliar ‘iconophile iconoclasm’ accuses genuine iconophiles of loosening the very basis of the Tradition, by allowing contemporary designs into the sanctuary. The Reverend Dwight Longenecker lashes out against what he calls the *wreckovation* or the “progressive ideology” that destroys the past instead of renewing it. He observes this:

The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s ushered in the most iconoclastic ideology since the Protestant revolution. Across the Western world, in a spirit of enthusiastic reform, Catholic churches were erected with no reference to the past. A new wave of ideologically driven priests teamed up with modernist architects to create round churches, fan-shaped mass centers, multi-purpose worship spaces and utilitarian cement block boxes. In an attempt to imbue some sense of the sacred they plopped ill shaped spires on the roof, created sweeping towers topped with crosses or punched holes in the walls with abstract stained glass.⁹⁶

It is a blessing to the church that nostalgic like Longenecker did not grow big in number. Consequently, their efforts to slacken the new iconophile wind on the church fell short.

Conclusion

A story, like the one Ramon Sarro narrates, resonates with my own experience. He recalls: “In 1993 I was walking with my friend Lamin around his native village in Guinea

⁹⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 130.

⁹⁶ Rev. Dwight Longenecker, "Wrecking Churches: Iconoclasm Or Continuity?" *Crisis Magazine*, Last modified 2019, <https://www.crisismagazine.com/2015/wrecking-churches-iconoclasm-continuity>.

when he pointed out at a manioc field: ‘And this is where our sacred bush used to be.’ ‘Used to be?’ I asked. ‘Yes’, he replied; ‘it was here that we used to do the initiations into manhood, but Asekou, a Susu man, cleared it in 1957; he put an end to our custom.’”⁹⁷

That story underlines the fact that iconoclasm affects all culture in different ways. It definitively starts with an ideology, which informs an attitude vis-à-vis the representation of religious image and symbols. When the ideology solidifies active engagement, it forces to the destruction of artwork and to the making of law hostile to icon veneration.

With regard to religion, the main question is “Where and what is the holy?” Such preoccupation postulates already the fear of idolatry. The Byzantine Controversy over the icons that leads in 843 to the Triumph of Orthodoxy has to face, under the influence of surrounding Jewish and Islamic religions, the divine prohibition of the image in the Old Testament. The Byzantine iconoclast does not buy into the argument of the Second Council of Nicaea that in the Incarnation, God himself lifts the old prohibition and renders the veneration of Icons a performative contemplation of the Saints’ virtues. The mistranslation of the Acta of the Council in the Latin West allows the *Libri Carolini* to distance itself from both Byzantine iconophile and iconoclast: the separation of a neutral art from the *holy* is born in Christianity. This secularized iconography leads to the social expansion and lavishness of medieval and Renaissance’s Christian architecture with the blessing of Thomas Aquinas’ Aristotelian criteria of beauty. The consequences in terms of ecclesiastical corruption that it generates will be condemned by the Reformers. Calvin and

⁹⁷ Ramon Sarro, *ibid.*, 261.

Puritanism, Kant and Hegel, the Artistic nihilism and others introduce a new iconoclasm that is purely metaphysical but works like cancer on religious piety. They defend that image-making is fake if it means to carry the holy. The remaining hope of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for icons trudges in an atheistic Marxism, a voracious capitalism, civilisations at war and churches nostalgic for a neo-Gothic in their western and non-western evangelizational expeditions.

One thing is clear, the iconoclast attitude reinvents itself throughout history, dimension, and level of discourse. It also means that our iconophile engagement should not rest but remain attentive to new challenges. That is to say, the preservation of the past with its actualization. That will be our next task with Theodore the Studite.



Figure 3. Mveng, *Nunc Dimittis*, 1966. In *Lève-Toi, Amie, Viens*, V.

CHAPTER II: THE ICONOPHILE THEOLOGY OF THEODORE THE STUDITE

Introduction

The last iconoclast crisis in Byzantium ends in 843 with a Synod that the Regent Theodora summons. That iconophile victory is called the Triumph of Orthodoxy. It has a hymn, that is believed to be the *exultet* of Theodore the Studite. It says:

Let us sing, O faithful, a song as an action of grace to the God and benefactor of all, because He raised a horn of salvation, and a great power; to protect the true faith.

Truly the divine grace has been shown to the world, and glory and honor are manifest; and for this reason the Church rejoices, having put on the stole, of which she had earlier been stripped.

The holy fathers, having woven again the garment of Christ, which had earlier been torn apart by John [the Grammarian], the seducer and the maker of poisons, gave it back to the church.

Having taken back the incarnated for of the Lord, the Church exults and rejoices with her children; it has received from him the ensigns of victory, the symbols of orthodoxy.⁹⁸

This canticle points at the consistent engagement of the Fathers to defend the Church within the Byzantine tradition towards icons, which is what this chapter aims to illustrate in its focus on Theodore's defense of Christology for the divine image. His thesis that Christian doctrine implies an incarnational hypostasis forms the basis for us to later affirm the importance and transcendence of Mveng's iconography.

This chapter has two steps. On the one hand, it discovers the roots of Theodore's Christology. For that reason, it is necessary to investigate how turbulences in Byzantium

⁹⁸ The complete *Celebratory Canon* is provided in Thomas Cattoi, *ibid.*, "Appendix", 171-178. See also, PG 99: 1767-80.

shape his love for icons and how this love is nourished by the iconophile writings of John Damascene and Maximos the Confessor. These two venerable authors provide the Christological ground on which The Studite sets his defense. On the other hand, in uncovering the iconophile zeal of Theodore, this chapter appreciates his insistence on the enhypostasized nature of Christ, who circumscribes himself within the properties of matter. Thus, Theodore stipulates that the uncircumscribability of Christ assumes the color, shape, time, etc., of the icon.⁹⁹ This chapter becomes a springboard to dive into in the next one and appreciate Mveng's artwork.

2.1- Genealogy of Theodore the Studite's theories

The first defender of icons is the godhead itself, that makes human being in his image and speaks his Word through the embodiment of his begotten One. Although this theology requires a distinctive approach based on cultures and traditions, it will proceed through ontological arguments, due to the early standard set by Christological controversies and surrounding Greek philosophies. That is why the first iconophile theologians are to be found among the early Fathers and councils that promote the doctrines on the Persons in the Trinity. Theodore the Studite was inspired by the Cappadocian Fathers, Cyril of Alexandria, Leontios of Byzantium, Maximos the Confessor, and especially John Damascene.

⁹⁹ Theodore the Studite, *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 13, PG 99: 396a-b.

2.1.1- Theodore the Studite's life and work¹⁰⁰

In 759, when Theodore came into the world, the iconoclast ruler Constantine V was in the middle of his reign. Theodore had interchanging relationships with the throne. He suffered exile three times for opposing the adulterous marriage of Constantine VI and the iconoclast revival of Leo V; but He also influenced other rulers.¹⁰¹ The sociopolitical insecurity of the Theodore's Byzantine empire in the eighth century had many causes. First was the upheaval in the Balkans. There was the fear of an Islamic invasion that was already cracking down on the patriarchates of Alexandria, Jerusalem and Antioch. When iconoclasm was not rooted in the zeal to uphold biblical prohibitions or Origenism, it was a politically correct position for any emperor to take in order to avoid further divisions among his Hebrew and Islamophilic subjects and alliances. "Iconoclasm, according to Cholij, was essentially a Constantinopolitan phenomenon" in this regard.¹⁰²

Theodore belonged to the high society of his time. His father, Photeinos, worked at the imperial treasury, before embracing a monastic life, and his cousin, Theodote, was crowned Augusta and became the wife of Constantine VI, the very one who exiled him. The eldest of four children, he received an elite education in grammar, Aristotelian dialectic, religion and rhetoric, and a pious catechumenate. In his time, the works of Sts. Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom were popular parchments. It is said that his library also

¹⁰⁰ Our historical background relies on the well-documented account of Roman Cholij's "Life and Times of Theodore the Stoudite" in Roman Cholij, *Theodore The Stoudite* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 1-77.

¹⁰¹ Roman Cholij, *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 14.

contained texts from Dionysios the Pseudo-Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa, Ignatius of Antioch, Athanasius, and John Damascene. While most of his writings evoke the memory of his masters, Theodore did not make much use of rhetorical or dialectical argumentation. He preferred to use an authority-based theological method, the common style of his time. Pressed on difficult questions, he simply referred to greater than himself, like sometimes to Basil.¹⁰³

The Studite shared most of his trials with his brother Joseph, archbishop of Thessalonica, venerated among the Eastern saints. But he embraced the monastic life after conversation with his spiritual father, Plato (ca.735-814). Indeed, Father Plato had abandoned his accumulated wealth and taken the monastic habit at Symboloi;¹⁰⁴ he contributed to the Nicene Council of 787 and also suffered imprisonment and exile twice. Before then, he had given the monastic habit to Theodore, his tonsured godson. He received holy orders and then was elected abbot of the monastery. He initiated a monastic reform, known as the Studite Rule, which was simply a return to the coenobitism – a monastic community-centered life – in contradiction to the then widespread practice of breeding livestock, keeping domestics and trading done by rich monasteries and their monks.

Under the new rules, monks took the place of their domestic workers and minister to each other in a spirit of charity and devotion. Spirituality ceased to be an abstract ideal but

¹⁰³ In the *Second Refutation*, he says: “If you have not, let us then listen to the words of St. Basil, who illumines our minds” in Thomas Cattoi, *ibid.*, 73. Also on the defense of icons, he just argues by quoting: “The honour given to an image goes to the prototype.” That was a Trinitarian argument on the divinity of the Son. Read: *De Spiritu Sanctu*, 18 in PG 32, 1490C.

¹⁰⁴ Theodore addresses an iconophile writing to Father Plato. Cf. “Letter to His Own Father Plato about the Veneration of the Sacred Images” in Cattoi, *Writings on Iconoclasm*, 135-139.

became concrete through obedience. Theodore also filled his monk's days with intellectual tasks such as calligraphy, education in the doctrine of icons and other erudite skills. But his focus was the life of prayer and humility. As knowledge grows, so must humility.¹⁰⁵

He warned on the danger of pride in his catechesis:

At the tribunal of Christ it will be of no avail being well-learnt, well spoken, knowing texts by heart, being well-read. The Fathers in *Gerontikon* were wise not because they knew much – some were quite uneducated. You can have studied much and yet still be eternally condemned. You can be saved even if you cannot distinguish α from β . but if you search out your own will, and have learnt everything and know everything, perhaps even the Egyptian alphabet, you will still feel fire consuming you for all eternity.¹⁰⁶

To this purpose, fidelity to the *lectio divina* practice – the reading and meditation of the Scriptures – helped nourish the inner life of the monks and make progress in the communal celebration. We see the influence from the Palestinian monasticism as well as the Constantinople church. Theodore of Studite brought back a very important monastic practice that was lost at his time. Theodore, who meditated at length on the lives of Sts Basil and Dorotheos of Gaza, reinstated the spiritual conversations where the monk manifested to the abbot his inner world and motions.

On the political scene, Emperor Constantine who had repudiated the Armenian queen Maria of Amnia, was crowning Augusta, Theodore's cousin as his new wife. The complaisant benediction of the patriarch raised the fury and condemnation of Theodore. In 797, the Studite fell in disgrace and was arrested and with Father Plato and their other monks, they were exiled. After the assassination of the emperor, Constantine's mother

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Epistula, 81. 26-8; and *Parva Catechesis* 118. 299.

¹⁰⁶ *Tvorenija Catechesis*, I. 60. 609, quoted in Roman Choliij, *ibid.*, 33.

ruled and re-established monastic life with the gift of the old monastery of Stoudios to Theodore and his fellow monks. But the *adulterous* synods of fifteen bishops in 806 and of assorted prelates in 809 resulted in another exile for him and Father Plato because of their refusal to recognize an illegitimate designation of Joseph – the very brother to Theodore – as the Patriarch of Thessalonica. He would be deposed under Michael, the next iconophile ruler. These troubling years are named as the Moechian conflict. It ended with Michael seeking the confidence of Charlemagne with the help of Nicephorus, the new patriarch. When the attack of the Bulgars forced Michael to resign in 813, according to Cholijs’s account, the new emperor Leo V, preoccupied with the stability of turbulent territories, “deduced that since iconophile rulers had all had a bad end, whereas iconoclast emperors had had glorious burials, icon veneration, despite official church teaching was at fault.”¹⁰⁷

Leo V appointed John Morocharzanios, named later as the ‘grammarian’ abbot of Sergios and Bakchos, and charged him to study the icon veneration question.¹⁰⁸ In 814, Leo helped declare the dividing decree on the prohibition of icons by the Synod of Hieria. In response, the Patriarch Nicephorus resigned the next year and Theodore organized a public procession of icons at his monastery in protest. Consequently, Leo closed down and, anathematized the monks that refused to sign an iconoclastic vow. The first iconophile Christian martyrs emerged from this period. While in exile in Smyrna, Theodore wrote extensively to encourage his own followers to persevere. He died in 826, weakened by

¹⁰⁷ Rilab Cholijs, *ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Cattoi, *Writings on Iconoclasm*, 225, n.3.

sickness, after dictating his last Catechesis. He did not live long enough to witness the restoration of the veneration of icon in 843, and his remains were transferred to the Studios monastery and laid beside his godfather and his brother.

Before studying the Studite's iconophile dialectic and its importance to Mveng's iconography, let us recall the teaching of Maximos the Confessor and John Damascene, his master, who influenced him.

2.1.2- Maximos the Confessor's Christocentricity

The neo-Chalcedonian Maximos the Confessor (580-662) participates in the Christological positions that inform Theodore's theology of icons. In the *Second Refutation of the Iconoclasts*, he is mentioned by Theodore since they both believe in the importance of spiritual ascetism (*kenōsis*) at the irreducible and individual level, which requires personal responsibility in the encounter with Christ – the image of God.¹⁰⁹ Maximos stipulates: “At the beginning, man came assuredly into existence in the image of God to be engendered by the Spirit through [His] choice.”¹¹⁰ Christ is the *logoi* of the virtues, and through his imitation – i.e. by following his commandment of love – one *repeats* the incarnation. Maximos asserts in his Christological principle of the deification that the saints are a “repeated incarnation” – the icons of the eternal Logos.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Cattoi, *ibid.*, “Second Refutation of the Iconoclasts”, 82.

¹¹⁰ Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua*, 42. PG 91:1031-1417.

¹¹¹ Maximos the Confessor, *Liber Asceticus*, 34 (PG 90: 340b). See also: PG 90: 1156d; Maximos the Confessor, *Antirrheticus* I, 6; all cited in Thomas Cattoi, *ibid.*, 25, 185-186 nn88-89.

Maximos' Christological doctrine upholds the Christ's composite subjectivity of the Chalcedonian Fathers and Leontios.¹¹² He accepts the idea that, even though Christ is a hypostasis with regard to the Father and to humanity, his subjectivity as a whole (*holos*) emerges out of his two natures. Jesus mediates the eternal Logos and his own humanity. Furthermore, Leontios has defended that within Christ's human essence, his subjectivity is always enhypostasized; and it is not so by accident. Leontios writes: "There is no nature without hypostasis."¹¹³ It means that 'nature' has always to have contents, whether it's the divine or the human, or something else. The contents become its hypostasis.

This validates fundamentally the maker and prayer of the icon, because Christ's subjectivity cannot be denied a bodily contemplation. At the same time Jesus' human hypostasis does not contain its principle of subjectivity, and his divine hypostasis results from the two natures. For Maximos, Christ does not subsist in two natures, but he emerges from them. The Confessor's principles of unity and duality ('unity without confusion nor division' in Chalcedonian terms) implies that under the composite subjectivity of Christ, the eternal Logos prevents his human hypostasis from undergoing changes, and, in the same process, his human nature under the *communicatio idiomatum* becomes an active principle to the eternal Logos, so that they act in the cosmos "as mirror of each other."¹¹⁴

¹¹² Read Thomas Cattoi, *ibid.*, "Christ Composite Subjectivity and the Ontological Status of his Humanity", 14-19.

¹¹³ PG 86:1280B

¹¹⁴ Thomas Cattoi, "Picturing Bodies", *ibid.*

This argument is another way for Maximos to articulate that icons do not start the embodiment of the divine. The embodiment of the divine has already been started ontologically from the moment the Trinity has established the relationship with the creation. Iconography allows for a highly trinitarian spirituality, and is an act of love, and a way of deification of humanity. We contemplate the Godhead through the Second Person of the Trinity in his human and divine hypostasis, because they are always together in a composite subjectivity. God reveals his triune nature to us asymmetrically. Theodore the Studite later relies on this salvific asymmetry to establish the representability of Christ's humanity.

This iconology of Saint Maximos reinforces our advocacy for artistic plurality that, later, we will expand to the artwork of Mveng. Maximos already indicates that although the Godhead is unchangeable, it is open to an infinite number of infusions in the faithful who choose to imitate its virtues through ascetism. Maximos reassures the Christocentric relations of any icon to Christ.¹¹⁵ This ontological relationship passes through the action of the Spirit and our free cooperation. He says, "At the beginning, man came assuredly into existence in the image of God to be engendered by the Spirit through [his] choice."¹¹⁶ According to the author Charalampos Sotiropoulos, in Maximos' reading of Paul and the Epistle to the Hebrews 10:1-2, the Old Covenant is the model of the forthcoming reality. The New Covenant is revealed in icons. Jesus says: "He who has seen me has seen the

¹¹⁵ Maximos the Confessor, *Epistulae* 2, (PG 91: 408a).

¹¹⁶ Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua* 42.

Father” (John 14:9). The New Covenant becomes the icon of the prototype Old One, but in a manner that surpasses the Old One.¹¹⁷

An icon serves as symbol of unity between believers and the church as the icon of the universe, it mediates the diversity of the world into a communal sanctuary.¹¹⁸ Icons are therefore the perfect medium to portray divine immersion into human history. This vision places the Church in a specific position. Centuries before the Second Council of Vatican and Mveng’s iconography, Maximos had already established the Holy Church as the tangible image of the invisible and visible beings, as the image of man. It is also said that a purified man is the icon of the Holy Church with such a deifying potentiality that the church and the Scripture can likewise be called ‘man’.¹¹⁹ Theodore the Studite agrees with Maximos when he views the Eucharist to be the agent of *koinonia* (communion).¹²⁰

2.1.3- John Damascene’s defense of the images

An avant-gardist of the spirituality of the icon in the seventh century is the last Father of the Eastern Church, John Damascene (676-749). One of his life’s goals is to offer a doctrinal opposition to iconoclasm. He develops the Incarnational theory of images which assembles the apologetic of the orthodoxy known at that time. In rebuke against Emperor

¹¹⁷ Charalampos Sotiropoulos, *La Mystagogie de Saint Maxime la Confesseur* (private edition: Athens, 2001), 17-18.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 136-139.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 14, my translation.

¹²⁰ Ibid, Chapt. 7.

Leo III's Image Breaking policies, he writes *The Three Treatises on the Divine Images*.¹²¹

The question of idolatry has always been so central to questions regarding the 'holiness' of any human artwork portraying the divine that John Damascene starts his first Oration with it. In using traditional and non-Christian aesthetics to inculcate their faith, the iconophile Byzantines are accused of obliterating the apostolic tradition and introducing pagan referents in into Christianity.

To this grievance based on the Torah rule, Damascene acknowledges that God "forbids the making of images because of idolatry and that it is impossible to make an image of the immeasurable, uncircumscribed, invisible God."¹²² Nevertheless, God is also the one who at first allows the making of images by becoming incarnated in human nature. The incarnation of the Logos becomes the sufficient justification and the proof of divine permission to iconophile commitment. The bodyless God, by taking flesh, frees humans from His own iconic prohibition. The New Covenant fulfils the Old Covenant in that regard too.¹²³ At the same time, the last Eastern Father specifies the level of relationship between the devout person and the icon, and God. "Use every kind of drawing, word, or color. Fear not; have no anxiety; discern between the different kind of worship... For adoration is one thing, and that which is offered in order to honor something of great excellence is another."¹²⁴ He is already announcing the difference between image and prototype which

¹²¹ John Damascene, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. by Andrew Louth (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003).

¹²² Ibid., I.4-7 (see also II.8; III.6-7).

¹²³ Ibid., I.8; III.8.

¹²⁴ Ibid., I.8.

is reserved only to God. We can dare to rephrase him in our own words: *To God all glory and adoration, to the image pious veneration.*

He affirms: “I do not worship [*proskynō*] matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who accepted to dwell in matter which wrought my salvation!”¹²⁵ For John, the emphasis should not be on the image, but rather on what it stands for, at to whom it points – God. John is stating that God *dwells* in matter which makes the image not only a symbol that point to God, but divine in its own right. The honor and adoration of the Godhead is key in our construction and use of icons. As we see in the following sections, the artwork has the benefit of the embodiment – making visible what is hidden. In that sense, for John Damascene, an icon is “a likeness, a paradigm” so that “man might advance in knowledge.”¹²⁶

Commenting on the *Treatises*, Jas Elsner notices that John Damascene draws from the ontology of images a claim for their epistemological relevance for the divine economy.¹²⁷ As we have already said, this methodological move testifies to the Christological privilege and its preponderance as standard of argumentation since the first Nicene ecumenical council of 325. John’s iconophile defense is incarnation-centered. Elsner writes:

The icon is ontologically validated through its Incarnational participation in Christ’s two natures, and it is through its quality as matter – fully accessible to humanity – that its access to Christ’s divine nature is made possible. The Christology both justifies the icon on ontological grounds as acceptable and

¹²⁵ Ibid., I.16; 2.14.

¹²⁶ Ibid., III. 16-17.

¹²⁷ Jas Elsner, *ibid.*, 378.

gives it its epistemological position as a conduit by which one may know God.¹²⁸

The refusal to accept this Christological assertion by iconoclasts allows the iconophiles to accuse them of the Arian heresy, to which they also can reply by accusing the iconophiles of idolatry. Here, the Basilian heritage can be added to the views of Damascene and the Studite.¹²⁹

The second council of Nicaea's rationale for nullifying the *Acta* of the Hieria gives rise to the performative contribution of the veneration of Icons taught previously by saint Basil of Caesarea. His *De creatione hominis* envisions how the process of being an icon (*eikon*) of God requires that one continuously model the likeness of God through active contemplation. For Basil, we are *eikon tou theou* (image of God), so the icon is a *mysterion* (sacrament) of God.¹³⁰ Emboldened by that view, the abovementioned council stipulates:

For the more often they [the saints] are seen through pictorial representations, the more are those who contemplate them aroused to the remembrance and the desire of the prototypes, to offer them kisses and prostrations though not true adoration, which according to our faith is due to the divinity alone, but the kind of veneration that we accord to the holy and life-giving Cross and to the holy books of the Gospel and the rest of the holy dedicated offerings, and to proffer incense and lights in their honor as was the revered custom among the ancients, because the honor to the icon passes to the prototype, and prostrations before the icon are prostrations to the person represented in the icon.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Ibid., 378.

¹²⁹ The Basilian heritage refers to the legacy and the teachings of St. Basil of Caesarea or Basil the Great (330-379). As the bishop of Caesarea, Basil forms the Trio of the so-called 'The Cappadocian Fathers', together with his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 – c. 395), bishop of Nyssa; and his friend, Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389), Patriarch of Constantinople.

¹³⁰ Basil of Caesarea, *Homiliae* X & XI.

¹³¹ *Mansi*, cited in Jas Elsner, *ibid.*, 382.

Saint John Damascene not only awakes Theodore to the Byzantine iconic controversy, but he also provides the framework to the Studite's Christology. So does Maximos.

2.2- The iconophile theology of Theodore the Studite

Theodore is a lover and defender of icons. His many writings on icons illustrate his passion for their making and veneration, which shines in many ways.¹³² He once suggested that Jesus would agree that an icon is equal to a godparent at the baptismal font. Here are his words to Spatharios John who has done so:

We have heard that your Lordship had done a divine deed and we have marvelled at your truly great faith, O man of God. For my informer tells me that in performing the baptism of your God-guarded child, you had recourse to a holy image of the great martyr Demetrios instead of a godfather. How great is your confidence! 'I have not found so a great faith, no, not in Israel' (Matt. 8:10) – this I believe Christ to have said not only at that time to the centurion, but even now to you who are of equal faith. [...] There [in the case of the centurion] the great Logos was present in his word and invisibly wrought the incredible miracle through His divinity, while here the great martyr was spiritually present in his own image and so received the infant.¹³³

This comment demonstrates the commitment of the Studite's iconophile love. For this reason, his christology of the image is also an apologetic for their veneration.

¹³² Thomas Cattoi outlines the most relevant ones: *The Three Refutations of the Iconoclasts*, the *Seven Chapters against the Iconoclasts*, *Some Questions Posed to the Iconoclasts*, *Letter to His Own Father Plato*, and the *Refutation and Subversion of the Impious Poems*. Cf. Thomas Cattoi, *Writings on Iconoclasm*, 227-228.

¹³³ Epistula, 17. 2-17, trans. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453* (NJ: Englewood Cliffs, 1972), 174-5.

2.2.1- The Christology of Theodore the Studite

Circumscription is the property of anything created, its finitude and limitation. At best, this term unveils the wonder of the physical world to obey specific laws and speaks to the intelligible proprieties bestowed on the world by the Creator. At worst, it deplores the subordination of limited and apparent beings to perpetual changes and subjugates them to an unstable will. Either way, circumscribed beings (intelligent, animal or inert) are created by God and dependent upon him, with an always sinful perspective. The ontological opposition between the created and the creator frames the foundation of the Byzantine opponents to Theodore. Although he agrees with the uncircumscribability of God as opposed to the bodily creation, he does not go down the path of iconoclasts by establishing the impossibility of the circumscribed to be deified.¹³⁴ Theodore recommends that in all cases, we should adopt an apophatic way of speaking of God and rest ourselves in humility. But since apophatic spirituality had been preached by Origen too, Theodore advises it only as a first step.

A further step for the Studite is to establish a consistent Christology. One has to acknowledge that with the Incarnation, a major change commences. Circumscribed matter has received the eternal Logos, and in so doing, Godhead blesses matter as he fashions his first Icon. Iconography become a divine enterprise. How does God operate and how does he surpass our understanding? Reassessing the Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa, Theodore lays down that this divine paradox, in freedom and from all eternity, chooses to enter a

¹³⁴ *Antirrheticus* I.2, PG 99: 329c-332a.

particular point in history of humanity and makes the uncircumscribable *blend* with the circumscribable, the infinite with the finite, and the temporary with the eternal.¹³⁵ Aware of the juxtaposition that the term *blend* connotes, he reaffirms the Chalcedonian creed of union “without confusion, without division” to his opponents.¹³⁶ His focus in the *First Refutation* is to convince the reader of the holiness of the icon. He opposes the view that the unlimited God loses its property of uncircumscription by merging with the limited. For Theodore, the fact that his opponent iconoclasts – Nestorians, Docetists, and Monophysitists – agree on the eternity of the incarnate Godhead, His impassibility, and His immortality and yet have seen Him walking, suffering, experiencing death, implies that in being circumscribed the Logos remains uncircumscribed. For Torstein Tollefsen, “Theodore clearly states that there is an aspect of the Son of God that is uncircumscribed even in the incarnate condition.”¹³⁷

With the humility from the *unknowability* and the *uncircumscribability* of the Godhead, the Studite dares to say that the begotten God-man’s circumscription does not apply to one man among men, in the sense that Jesus would be a mere man. For our author, the divine hypostasis of the Godhead has assumed human nature as a whole, and not in an abstractive way. “The nature [of Christ] is therefore *enhypostasized* in another hypostasis,”¹³⁸ particular to the Logos’ humanity, in such a providential manner that Christ is not an

¹³⁵ *Antirrheticus*, *ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Antirrheticus* I.3, PG 99: 332b-c.

¹³⁷ Torstein Theodor Tollefsen, *St Theodore the Studite’s defence of the icon: theology and philosophy in ninth-century Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 71.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

unconcreted universal body. As the Epistle to the Hebrews reassures (He 4:15),¹³⁹ Christ has been seen walking, talking, feeling.¹⁴⁰ Here Theodore builds a strong point for Christ's composite subjectivity, as he celebrates the providence of receiving the recorded Scripture. Having a history, according to the Studite, does not diminish, the potentiality to deification and the assumption of the whole humanity. This point will be essential in our last chapter on Mveng's significance in today's Christianity.

Taking the Scripture as an incontestable witness, Theodore asserts that uncircumscribability and circumscribability are properties, not essences, of the divine and human nature of Christ. In their union within Christ, the stronger does not consume the weaker, but it preserves it. Theodore has already in mind what characteristics are preserved in Christ's circumscription, which are shared with the icon: color, geometrical three dimensions, and a concrete surface.¹⁴¹ Christ's Passion serves as confirmation that he preserves his circumscription, despite the Nestorians' view that opposes the hypostatic union and postulates two different subjectivities in the eternal Logos and Jesus, loosely united at the incarnation. The Studite, who believes in the hypostatic union, cites a commonly used passage at his time from Proverbs 8: 22 and 25, which states, "The Lord created me as the beginning of his ways, for the sake of his works... before the mountains

¹³⁹ Read also 1 Jn 1:1.

¹⁴⁰ *Antirrheticus* I. 4, PG 99: 332d-333a

¹⁴¹ *Antirrheticus* III, 1.3-6, PG 99: 392b-c

were established and before the hills, he begot me.” He indicates that verse twenty-two refers to the circumscription of Christ and verse twenty-five to his uncircumscription.¹⁴²

At this point, our author cannot escape the question of the modality of the incarnation, i.e. the *communicatio idiomatum*. Theodore usually relies on the Cappadocian Fathers, but in regard to this question, he uses Maximos the Confessor as his inspiration. On the other hands, his opponents cite Saint Gregory of Nyssa to validate their iconoclast thesis. Indeed, Gregory had written: “By mixture with the infinite, boundless character, [the inferior human nature of Christ] remained no longer in its own measures and properties”; and “The flesh was not identical with the Godhead before it was transformed and made identical with the Godhead.”¹⁴³ Gregory suggests that the exaltation of the circumscription occurs after Christ’s passion.

Theodore differs from Gregory of Nyssa by conceiving the ontological union between the divine and the human without denying the historicity of the incarnation.¹⁴⁴ This lines up with Maximos as we have already seen. The specificity of Theodore hangs in his composite concept of Christ’s *will* (θέλω and βούλομαι) that realises his supernatural properties prior to the Passion and his human properties after the Resurrection.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² *Antirrheticus* III, 1. 37, PG 99: 392d-393a.

¹⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, GNO 2, 124, 130; cited in Tollefsen, *ibid.*, 78-79.

¹⁴⁴ Cattoi analyses: “Theodore, echoing Maximos the Confessor and John Damascene, the hypostatic union is a historical event that marks an irreversible transformation in the ordering of the cosmos; in the incarnation, humanity is subsumed into the divinity, so that it is possible to assert that the hypostasis of Christ is now a composite hypostasis, bearing within itself two natures” in Thomas Cattoi, “Picturing Bodies”, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Antirrheticus* 2. 46, PG 99: 385a-b.

Theodore invites us to admire the divine economy, through the Gospel, and how the two natures of Christ are perfectly tuned. First, during his ministry before the resurrection, we see Christ performing divine actions (viz., miracles and the remission of sins). Second, at his most divine glorification after the resurrection, he performs human actions, viz., eating and allowing Thomas to touch him. Tollefsen here warns us about the anachronism of properties: *solidity* does not mean solely *bodily beings*; and similarly *non-solidity* does not indicate uncircumscription. He says, “Angels are without solidity, but not without circumscription. For this reason, Theodore can argue that Christ is still, in His Glory, circumscribed bodily as a human being, even if He is beyond all corruptibility.”¹⁴⁶

This entails a huge contribution to iconography. It means that a holy icon does not find itself necessarily confined by geometry and physics. With these latter, images are open to the divine in an enhypostasized nature, i.e. sharing the common nature of universality while simultaneously differentiating themselves by their distinct properties. Like Peter or Paul, Christ is an icon that assumes the universality (*ousia*) as well as his particularity (*hyparxis*).¹⁴⁷ And for Christ, the divine hypostasis is the principle of mediation (unification), so that there is no second hypostasis in the incarnate Logos, even though one cannot postulate a nature without hypostasis.¹⁴⁸ For instance, just as Peter’s inward properties (memories, mortality, rationality) cannot be painted unless through the media of the outward circumscription, so it is with the hypostasis of the Logos. And because the two

¹⁴⁶ Tollefsen, *ibid.*, 85-86.

¹⁴⁷ *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 17, PG 99: 397b-c

¹⁴⁸ *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 24, PG 99: 401a.

natures are perfectly united, the icon of Christ (the *eidos*) preserves the property of the circumscribed uncircumscription.¹⁴⁹ What we venerate in an icon is that which is divine within it, and Theodore dives further, saying, “But since the likeness is one, one is also the veneration of both.”¹⁵⁰ Likeness here means *appearance* as in *whole*. The *whole* insinuates the general view that inform the capacity of identification by the viewer.¹⁵¹ In transiting from ontology to epistemology, Theodore reappreciates the words of the Lord, “He who has seen me, has also seen the Father” (John 14:9).

2.2.2- The relationship between the image and the prototype

Iconoclasts refute the veneration of images because its inconformity with the biblical canon and also the incommensurable division between the spiritual and material realms. We have seen how Theodore tackles the biblical prohibition alibi. It is time to address here the relationship between image and prototype on the ground of the logic of their dialectic.

The following quotation, from Thomas Cattoi’s translation of *Antirrhetici*, summarizes the complex understanding of Theodore the Studite’s dialectic of relationship between the image and the prototype, and vice-versa (*italics mine*).

When about Christ it is *written*, “Let all the angels of God venerate him,” what else should be understood, but that the passage refers to the prototype? Indeed, he became man after being God, in the same way as each human being is the prototype of his own portrait would not be an image; in the same way, then, Christ having become like us in all things, is the prototype of his own image, even if this is not written in these very terms. So, then, when you ask where it is written that the icon of Christ should be venerated, then you

¹⁴⁹ *Antirrheticus* 3 Gamma 10, PG 99: 424d.

¹⁵⁰ *Antirrheticus* 3 Gamma 11, PG 99: 425a-b.

¹⁵¹ Tollefsen, *ibid.*, 95.

should also hear the answer, which is, wherever it is written that Christ should be venerated,” given that the copy is inseparable from the prototype.”¹⁵²

Theodore’s term *written*, first refers to Scripture and secondly to Tradition with its doctrines, such as Mary as *Theotokos* or the divinity of the Holy, which are absent from the Scripture, instead emerging from the apostolic wisdom and the Councils.

An icon of Christ does not need to be rendered by a contemporary artist to the historical Jesus. This viewpoint understands that the guiding principle of the prototype is that it generates its own image. Under this principle, the Logos becomes flesh. The general principle within the prototype is existential and not essential. This means that it works for the subject ‘Jesus’ in the same way that it does for Peter or Paul. This principle is also existential because of the *sine qua non* postulate of the hypostasis, which acknowledges that un-real entity possesses no intrinsic being and, as such cannot be represented in an icon. For a fictional ghost (such as a *man-lion*) lacking an existence, could not bear an image intrinsically.

However, the divinity in the icon does not descend from the processes of the hypostatic union, where the uncircumscribed divinity is subject to the circumscription of his flesh. “In the case of the image, however, the flesh of Christ is not ontologically present. As a result, the divinity of Christ indwells the sacred image in the same way as it is present in all beings,”¹⁵³ and establishes an ontological relationship between image and prototype. Icons

¹⁵² *Antirrheticus* II, 6, trans. Thomas Cattoi, *ibid.*, 64-65, PG 99: 356b.

¹⁵³ Thomas Cattoi, *Writings on Iconoclasm*, 34.

in themselves do not carry the divine likeness,¹⁵⁴ hence the veneration of icon instead of their adoration. The Eucharist, instead, contains the fullness of the divine nature.

It is important to be clear about the refusal of the Studite to address the Eucharist using *typoi* (a type of image). The Holy Species (the consecrated bread and wine) belongs to the category of *mysteria* (sacraments)¹⁵⁵ and has an ontological identity and a relation of equality and consubstantiality.¹⁵⁶ Christ's image always subsists (*hyphestōsan*) in Christ's prototype in the sense that one is always followed with oneself's shadow.¹⁵⁷

2.2.3- The role of the icon

Although Theodore's writings and engagement contribute to the *systematical* debate of his time, his Christology is fundamentally directed towards the veneration of icons and the defense of iconography. In other words, his incarnational approach fits into Christian soteriology, and, because of that, his intellectual disposition draws from his spirituality as abbot of Studite and leads to a transformative veneration which is eschatological in nature.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ *Antirrheticus* III, Beta & Delta.

¹⁵⁵ *Antirrheticus* I, 10; see also, Thomas Cattoi, *ibid.*, p.194 n54.

¹⁵⁶ Even iconoclasts agree on the Eucharist particularity as we saw it in the previous chapter. It was not then the debated matter, except that the use that consensus to show how laughable is it to uphold other images to the standard of the Eucharist.

¹⁵⁷ *Antirrheticus* III, Delta 2.

¹⁵⁸ Cattoi, *ibid.*, 36.

From the explanation of the thoughts of St. Basil that “the honor given to the image passes over to the prototype,”¹⁵⁹ Theodore evokes a very social impression at his time of strong powers where the sight of an image of the emperor acquires automatic sentiment of respect (veneration) from the citizens, as if the specific emperor were present. A parallel in our time can be found in our attitude before a uniform, flag, or trophy. In the recent event of the tragedy of the Notre Dame Cathedral in flames (Paris, France; April 2019), the planetary empathies, that have surged, demonstrate that symbols and icons can become part of ourselves.¹⁶⁰ The collective social and cultural ‘essence’ is also materialized in objects to the end that when we risk losing a monument like Notre Dame of Paris, we feel as if something of our own essence is being lost as well. In the material delineation of our icon, we uplift ourselves to Christ. The Studite claims that we should synonymously take Christ for his Holy Image, and vice-versa by virtue of their likeness. We should also respect their difference homonymously by virtue of their shared essence.¹⁶¹ This likeness is the one making present the bodiless and timeless prototype of the icons.¹⁶² Through the material, we ascend to the prototype. An iconophile Christian assembly invokes, therefore, the memory (*anamnesis*). The saint Paul’s ‘Do this in memory of me’ (1Cor. 11:24) “sums up the *whole* Economy” and displays the hermeneutic aspect of the making and veneration of

¹⁵⁹ PG 32: 149c, *Liber de Spiritu Sancto* 18.45 and *Antirrheticus* II, 13, PG 99: 364a-b.

¹⁶⁰ Philippe Lecaplain, “Accents Du Monde - Notre-Dame: Un Élan De Solidarité Mondial”, RFI, Last modified 2019, <http://www.rfi.fr/emission/20190419-accent-monde> (Access: 04/20/2019).

¹⁶¹ *Antirrheticus* III, Delta 6, PG 99: 429d-432a; *Antirrheticus* I.11, PG 99: 341c.

¹⁶² *Antirrheticus* III, Beta 4, PG 99: 417d.

icons.¹⁶³ Following the Aristotelian analysis of Maximos the Confessor, Theodore indicates the way of veneration of icon: it comes through contemplation (the seeing with the intellect).¹⁶⁴

Conclusion

Theodore agrees with the iconoclasts on the Mosaic interdiction of any representation and adoration of handmade image, under the penalty of idolatry. But he founds his iconophile Christology on the divine providence in the Incarnation. God forbids representation, then God renders it possible. In the analogy of the fulfilment of the Old Testament by the New, the Studite poses the composite hypostasis of Christ as the image of the Godhead. In line with the respected Cappadocian Fathers, the term *composite* means that Christ's subjectivity emerges from his fully assumed divine and human natures, without confusion nor division. An image is the perfect media to account for such mystery, and its veneration makes present our deification in Christ.

How do we keep away from idolatry? We can paraphrase Theodore's response to this question, saying: 'To the prototype, veneration, honour and adoration! To the image, honour and veneration!'¹⁶⁵ Now we have built the theoretical basis that can support Mveng's iconography.

¹⁶³ Tollefsen, *ibid.*, 140.

¹⁶⁴ *Antirrheticus* III, Alfa 16-18 PG 99: 397a-d; Cf. *Ambigua* 20, PG 91: 1240b.

¹⁶⁵ *Antirrheticus* 1.8, PG 99: 337b.



Figure 4. Mveng, *Dan Mask*, 1980. In *L'Art et l'Artisanat Africains*, 90.

CHAPTER III: ENGELBERT MVENG’S CHRIST, THE *MASTER OF INITIATION*

Introduction

The theologian and historian Engelbert Mveng wrote more than a dozen books and presented countless papers and conference talks. He teamed up with paleontologist Cheikh Anta Diop and historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo to present the African continent as the first receptacle of human life and civilization.¹⁶⁶ Mveng belongs to a group of *alti Christi* who assume their Christian responsibility to free human beings from the chains of captivity. Thus, they work vehemently to bury the pandemic of colonization. Their “holy wrath” has given birth to a new ecclesiology. For this reason, Mveng is not often listed among the Christological thinkers,¹⁶⁷ despite his otherwise rich elaboration of Christ’s ontology. In this paper, we do not seek to dilute his scholarship in the field of Liberation Theology, but we desire to focus on his systematic theology, keeping in mind that theology is a whole and that ultimately ‘everything belongs to Christ’ (Luke 20:25; John 3:35).

¹⁶⁶ Mveng, “L’Afrique berceau de l’homme, berceau de la civilisation” in Mveng, *L’art et l’artisanat Africains*, *ibid.*, 8.

¹⁶⁷ There is no appearance of Mveng or only one single line index of his Christological analogy in Diane Stinton’s multiple hundred paged Book on contemporary African Christologies, we believe, because that kind of reason. Cf. Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa* (NY: Orbis Book, 2004), 10-11.

Yamb Gervais Désiré makes this bias remark: “the liberating Christ between ‘systematic eclecticism’ and ‘eclectic systematisation’”. One of the major limits of Mveng’s Christology seems to be at the level of his systematization, perceived here as an ordering of ideas by an active mind, with a view to asserting, confirming, refuting a thesis. His major works are not systematic treatises on Christology”, Gervais Désiré Yamb “Christologie Africaine de la Libération chez Mveng : Recherche des fondements” in *Père Engelbert Mveng, S.J.: Un pionnier*, Ahoussi Thomas, ed., (Kinshasa: Loyola Canisius, 2005), 121; my translation.

A glimpse of our author's Christological thoughts can be seen in portions in his writings as well as his abundant sculptures and paintings, which include:

- *Si... quelqu'un... Chemin de croix* (1962) which is a representation of the "Stations of the Cross and Resurrection". It adorns many churches and chapels.
- *The Uganda's Martyrs*, which is a painting on the back of Collège Libermann Chapel in Douala (Cameroon) to celebrate the Christian witness of 23 Anglican and 22 Catholic converts who were executed between 1885 and 1887 in Uganda.
- *Hekima Christus* (1988), the altar backdrop in the Hekima College chapel in Nairobi (Kenya)
- *Mural* (1990) of the Holy Angels Catholic Church in Chicago (USA) – Figure 2.
- *Our Lady of Africa* in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth (Israel),
- *Lève-toi Amie, Viens* (1966), a book of depictions and poems on Ten mysteries of Jesus' childhood life.

3.1- The revolutionary Christology of Mveng

As noted in the General Introduction, we do not intend to make artistic analyses and evaluations. Our methodology focuses on iconic doctrines throughout history. A clue to reading Mveng's Christology and the painting of Jesus, the *Master of Initiation*, resides in this claim: "It is in Africa, not in Latina America, that the Liberation Theology is born, at

the end of the nineteenth century”, but it is all a part of the Christian heritage, because Jesus was the first to preach a liberation theology.¹⁶⁸

An important remark regarding Mveng’s Christology should be made. He believes in Pan-Africanism and publishes on that movement.¹⁶⁹ For this reason, his Christological construction may appear unilateral to the reader, because of his tendency to generalize local symbols and forms over the rest of Africa. To that criticism, we can respond that Mveng as a preeminent African historian acknowledges and respects the diversity and differences in African cultures and histories. Nevertheless, for him, they display fundamental shared origins and characteristics. Thus, Mveng allows himself a work of synthesis as a duty of the scholar. We will try to clarify origins of symbols and forms that will be cited in this work.

3.1.1- The life of Mveng¹⁷⁰

Engelbert Mveng was born on May 9, 1930, in Cameroon to a Presbyterian family. He was baptized and schooled in the Catholic mission at Efok. When he entered the minor seminary of Akono, he was already a distinguished painter. In 1951 he started his Jesuit education by joining the Noviciate in Djuma (Belgium Congo). Three years later, Mveng

¹⁶⁸ Engelbert Mveng, *L'Afrique dans l'Église. ibid.*, 101, 174, 199. Most of Mveng’s books are in French. Quotes from these writings are translations done by the author of this thesis.

¹⁶⁹ It is a worldwide movement that promotes bonds of solidarity among Africans living in Africa and in the diaspora. It views Africans, especially the sub-Saharan Africans, as having a common cultural background. It acknowledges also their diversities. Read: Mveng, *Dossier Culturel Panafricain*, Paris, Présence africaine, 1966.

¹⁷⁰ On the life of Engelbert Mveng, we rely mainly on the account of Jean-Paul Messina. Read J-P Messina, *Engelbert Mveng* (Yaoundé: Presse de l’UCAC, 2003).

was sent to Belgium and France where he studied theology and philosophy and was ordained a priest in 1963. While at the Sorbonne in France, he defended his doctoral dissertation on “The Greek sources of Negro-African history from Homer to Strabo” (1970). From then until his assassination in April 1995, Mveng taught at various universities in Africa such as University of Yaoundé, Cameroon. As a Jesuit priest, his prolific writings distinguish him as historian, theologian, lecturer, poet, and artist.

Knowledge of Engelbert Mveng’s origins engenders a deeper understanding of his character and person. Let us look at his birthplace village – *Enam-Ngal-Ngoulemakong*. According to the Cameroonian historian Messina,¹⁷¹ in the Ewondo language *Enam-ngal* means “a sniper” or a straight speaker; *Ngoulemakon* means ‘by the power of spears’. Mveng’s village was named after the resistance movement against early German colonialism, symbolizing the bravery of their fighting sons and daughters. From his *griots*’ context (made of storytellers who safeguard the tradition), Mveng surely heard, during his childhood, thousands of stories about his heroic ancestors and grew in the desire to their imitation.¹⁷² Cameroon was a German colony that became a French colony after the first masters lost the First World War. The Cameroon of Mveng paid the bloody price in the sacrifice of his own *Senegalese Tirailleurs* – African battalions that were poorly trained and forced to defend the Allies at frontlines during the Second World War. Thus, Mveng

¹⁷¹ Jean-Paul Messina, *Engelbert Mveng*, 28.

¹⁷²A person, member of a class of traveling poets, musicians, and storytellers who maintain the tradition of oral history in parts of West and Central Africa. According to Gillon, “the griot ... is the equivalent of the European court chronicler... Torday, for example, was able to use the stories of the Kuba king’s griot to establish a Kuba chronology, by linking the oral history with events dated elsewhere”, in Werner Gillon, *A Short History Of African Art* (Harmondsworth: Middy Penguin Books, 1991), 22.

is a Pan-Africanist who was nursed with revolutionary songs from the cradle. The themes of political, economic and cultural liberation governed the life, painting, and writing of Mveng. In this regard, the entire work of our artist echoes the socio-historical beliefs of his village in Cameroon.

Iconography has a mystical dimension. As an artist, the historian Mveng was a mystic who believed that the wisdom of Africa resides in its arts and in the interpretation of its symbols, and that the work of understanding African art should be the responsibility of Africans and not of foreigners.¹⁷³ In 1963 he wrote *Histoire du Cameroun* (The History of Cameroon) from a post-colonial perspective.¹⁷⁴ For him, a work of African art expressed the African life experience in such a manner that it went beyond the simple limitation of words. For Mveng, the artist is a servant of what is within him that which is more than him. The artist creates by obeying the art. For Mveng, African art has a mystical identity coming from God.¹⁷⁵ Theodore the Studite had a similar understanding of icons. In every fresco, Mveng imaged people's joy and sorrow, activities and hopes, cultures and history.

Lève-toi Amie, *Viens*, *Hekima Christus*, and other artworks emerged out of the framework of Mveng's participation in the first African Festival of Art which took place

¹⁷³ Engelbert Mveng, "The Function and Significance of Negro Art in the Life of the People of Black Africa", in *Colloquium: Function and Significance of African Negro Art in the Life of People and for the People* (March 30 – April 8, 1966), (Dakar, Senegal: Society of African Culture, 1968), 15.

On Mveng's mystical life, read: Patrick Claffey, *Movement Or Moment?* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 111. Also, Mveng, *L'Afrique dans l'Eglise*, 55-62.

¹⁷⁴ Mveng, *Histoire du Cameroun* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1963).

¹⁷⁵ Jean-Paul Messina, *ibid.*, 170.

in Dakar, Senegal in April 1966. He played a key role at this continental event by setting its schedule, traveling to different countries, and meeting various artists in various socio-political and economical cultures. Throughout, he was educated about the complexity and similarity of African Christian and non-Christian artworks. This rich knowledge from his tour led him to publish *L'art et l'Artisanat Africains* (Art and African Handicraftsman) in 1980, fourteen years after the first African festival.¹⁷⁶

The theology of Mveng emerged in a global context of ante- and post-Second Vatican Council, which was characterized by the thirst for peoples' rights and religious inclusiveness. It is logical to assert that Mveng was aware of contemporary calls for change, like the "I have a dream" speech of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela's fight to end apartheid in South Africa, or the "Anonymous Christian" theology of Karl Rahner. In Africa, Mveng was among the first to understand the socio-political structure of what he called the "anthropological poverty".¹⁷⁷ Mveng was already involved in the early preparations for the First African Synod (1994) as he had participated in its 1984 preparatory meetings in Cameroon. He explained this "anthropological poverty" while discussing the Synod from the African context and how the African Church related to both Christ and the Church, saying:

The Synod can help us to discover the African bride of Christ, which is the church on our continent with all its beauty and its ugliness, with the stigmata of five centuries of oppression and martyrdom, and of the anthropological annihilation of Africans on all the continents. It can help us to meet the gaze of our mother the church in Africa, which sounds out our hearts and asks us gravely: how long will I have to wait for the day when

¹⁷⁶ Mveng, *L'art et l'artisanat africains*, (Yaoundé: CLE, 1980).

¹⁷⁷ Mveng, *L'Afrique dans l'Eglise*, 110, 118, 199-213.

you achieve in me what is lacking in the catholic dimension of the body of Christ? When will you finally make yourself the truly African Catholic Church?¹⁷⁸

Mveng directs his indignation at African Christians as well as at Vatican officials. He voices the same hope as Martin Luther King, in a Christological way that sees Christ as a liberator from within and not as an outsider. There is a petition for transfiguration. Mveng contemplates the resurrection of Christ in the suffering and death of Africans. He preaches a hope at the horizon with the *Master of Initiation*.

3.1.2- The Christological depictions of Mveng

Despite the criticism Mveng reserves for the missionaries controlling the helm of the African Colonial boat, he perceives Christianity as an African religion. At a conference in Jerusalem in 1972, he states:

Here we are at the school of the Holy Scripture. The message in the Bible is ours, because we are the people of the Bible, because Africa is the Land of the Bible, because the second river of the Paradise is named Geon, and it surrounds Kush country, viz., the Africa of the Black People. From Genesis, Africa and the Black Africans are present in the Bible. [...] We too are heirs of the Bible and responsible for its message yesterday, today and tomorrow. We come here to learn how to decipher that message, which is ours as well as yours.¹⁷⁹

In the same conference speech, Mveng extends the biblical exegesis of Origen who sees in the Black inhabitants of Kush the mystical reach of God's salvation to the nations. In the union of Moses with the Kushite woman (Num 12:1), Origen depicts the union of

¹⁷⁸ Mveng, "The historical background of the African Synod" in *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, ed. Maura Browne (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 30.

¹⁷⁹ Mveng, "La Bible et l'Afrique noire", *ibid.*, p.10-11; my translation.

Christ to the Church. In the Shulamite of the Song of Songs (Sng 7:1), he implicates the divine election of the pagan to become his Church. In the pilgrimage of the Queen of Saba to the court of Solomon (Mt 12:42), he states the analogy of the church's meeting with Christ, her Spouse, and, in the black Ebed-Melek who pulls Jeremy out of the pitch (Jer 38: 7-13), he sees the faith of pagan people in the resurrection.¹⁸⁰ For Mveng, Christ comes from a culture that shares many similitudes with Africans. In this way, his portrayal of the African mystical Christ takes him closer to the historic Jesus, the Palestinian. Africans can relate to the salvation history as their own. For instance, in *The Escape to Egypt*, the Baby Jesus is pictured on the back of Mary in a fashion similar to the way Sub-Saharan mothers carry their babies. Mveng adds to the painting a cosmic motif with spirals to indicate the divine majesty hidden in the tragedy.¹⁸¹

For Mveng, “the fact that we are part of the biblical heritage does not imply we are Christians,”¹⁸² and he cites the people of Israel as an example. Our heritage is a religious one that leaves us with a choice: fulfilment in Christ or rejection of Him. African resemblance to Christ on the cross is great, but face-to-face with the lamenting Christ, the African needs adherence and conversion to Christ in order to share His “Eloï, Eloï! Lamma Sabachtani?” (Matt 27:46). Mveng elects art as a sure means to this conversion. He writes: “For the African soul, there is certainly no safer way to go to Christ than the humble journey through the providential ways that God has prepared for us through our cultural

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Mveng, *Lève-toi, Amie, Viens*, ibid., VII.

¹⁸² Mveng, *L'Afrique dans l'Eglise*, 66.

heritage.”¹⁸³ For this reason, Jesus’ history does not only offer circumscribable closeness to the African culture, but Mveng also foresees the cultural dimension of our identity as a receptacle for the uncircumscribable presence of Christ. This *a priori* gift of the presence of Christ is followed by a crisis moment of the meeting between Africa and Christ.

In his paintings Mveng captures in tormenting black-colors, deadly white-colors, and life-giving reds the dialectical crisis of Christianization in Africa. Mveng mentions the use of other colors in African iconography: the green, the blue, and the purple.¹⁸⁴ However he does not consider these latter to be representative of a shared African patrimony. The red, black and white colors shares that patrimony, according to Mveng. He unequivocally declares the three are universal in African context.¹⁸⁵

These three colors have both ontological and existential significance for Mveng. Their ontological significance concerns the challenge of Christ’s irruption in any culture and life. This irruption places each African Christian before the *divine judgment*. At this moment, Africans find themselves in a dialogue for authenticity before Christ. Just as in his irruption into Jewish and Roman culture and life, Christ “questions the deep roots of our [African] personality, while at the same time he assumes our flesh in its most noble integrity. He rediscovers in us the New Man, and we form our human face at his likeness.”¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Mveng, *L’Afrique dans l’Eglise*, 62.

¹⁸⁴ Mveng, *L’Art et l’Artisanat Africains*, 30. Also: Mveng, *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 33.

¹⁸⁵ Mveng, *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 32.

¹⁸⁶ Mveng, *L’Afrique dans l’Eglise*, 84. All the citations from Mveng’s French version books are my own translation.

Mveng always leaves in his paintings of Christ this belonging and unbelonging nature of the Saviour enhypostasized nature. In his *Nunc Dimittis* (Figure 3),¹⁸⁷ Jesus is the normal Bantu baby in the arms and of a diligent, old Wise man, and at the same time he is enlightening the face of the old Wise man.

In the poem attached to this painting are the wise man's praise of Him with the words, "my Child, my Sun". This phrase implies that this Child, who needs the protective arms of the old wise man, is also recognized by him as the divine *Sun*. The existential moment of this dialectic recalls the process that moves from alienation to annihilation of the Africans by the European missionaries. At this moment – which Mveng calls the "treason felony vis-à-vis the Gospel"¹⁸⁸ – Death changes place with Life. In the attempt to *depersonalise* the African, the missionaries tried in vain to reverse the incarnation of the Logos as the Unique Saviour who through his passion and death reaches the Africans' annihilation tragedy. Mveng always expresses this perpetual combat between life and death through the symmetrical use of white color for death, and red color for life. His use of these colors in the *Uganda's Martyrs* illustrates this dialectic at that double level of depersonalisation and treason felony. In the reddish emphasis that abounds in his 1990 painting, *The Mural* in the Holy Angels Catholic Church in Chicago, the Christ of Mveng is the Master of life, and the fulness of life he promises (John 10:10). We can notice the absence of the use of

¹⁸⁷ Mveng, *Lève-toi, Amie, Viens*, *ibid.*, V.

¹⁸⁸ Mveng, *L'Afrique dans l'Eglise*, 80.

white and black colors in this piece as the affirmative vision of Mveng's eschatological feast which realizes the beatitudes.

The call for the beatitude remains a call for conversion.¹⁸⁹ Thus, Mveng says, "The conversion of any people completes, according to the words of St. Paul, what is lacking in the stature of the Body of Christ which is the Church[...] Africa, in becoming Christian, is working towards the completion of the Universal Church."¹⁹⁰ The double depersonalization generates a crisis that results in a double dialogue, which departs from and culminates in the Body of Christ. Mveng's preference for the paradigm of the 'Body' of Christ holds the real mystical meaning of his artistic understanding of corporeity. Our next chapter will help us discover more fully how in the immanence of the sacred matter, the hidden divinity sustains its might.

In the nuptial Pauline analogy of Christ's Body and the Church and its members, Mveng upholds his Christology of the redeeming dialogue. Mveng, who often references the Hegelian dialectic of the Master and the Slave at their synthesis phase,¹⁹¹ calls this aesthetical moment of the African Christianity the moment of *fecundity* or *socialisation* in the Cycle of Life.¹⁹² In this phase, which is the Christological moment of liberty and love, the African Being becomes plural and ceases to appear like the *monad* he or she was before

¹⁸⁹ Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World" in *Paths of African Theology*, ed. Rosino Gibellini, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 163.

¹⁹⁰ Mveng, *L'Afrique dans l'Eglise*, 90.

¹⁹¹ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 121.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 76, 113.

the encounter with Christ. At the same time, the universal Church has taken a renewed shape since encountering Africans and non-Western Christians. Such a cosmic gathering is celebrated by the icon on the cover of Mveng's book *L'Art d'Afrique Noire* (Figure 1).¹⁹³ In it, Mveng translates the infusive active agency of Christ that creates a new Being and fulfils our divinisation through the Church and Africa encounter. The two faces are One in Christ, undivided and unconfused. Mveng materialises what Levinas, Arendt, and Ricoeur will certify later in their analysis of the ontological structure of the *Dasein* as oneself and the face of the *other* at the same time. In the Introduction to Paul Ricoeur's book, *Oneself as Another*, Kathleen Blamey makes this summary: "the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other."¹⁹⁴

This double status as identity and mission in Christ occupies the artistic transcendence in Mveng's theology. On the one hand, the Church is no longer the same and does not mission in the same way. And on the other, the African is no longer the same and does not live in the same way either. We contemplate such a Christological dialectic in the *Uganda's Martyrs* polyptych.¹⁹⁵ At the Cross, the African Martyrs take the place of Mary the Mother

¹⁹³ *L'Art d'Afrique Noire: liturgie cosmique et langage religieux*, (Paris, Mame, 1964).

As mentioned on Figure 1, this image has two names. Mveng uses the image in 1964 to illustrate *The Double Dialectic* in his book *L'art d'Afrique Noire* (frontpage and page 77). Later, in 1967, the same image reappears in his book *Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?* (Appendix n.4) and is called there, *The Virgin and the Child*. Thus, we keep the two names.

¹⁹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, Transl. Kathleen Blamey, III ed., (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Pr, 2008), 3.

¹⁹⁵ This altarpiece is painted at the back of College Libermann chapel in Douala, Cameroon. Cf. <http://indigenesusjesus.blogspot.com/2017/06/engelbert-mveng-ugandan-martyrs-altar.html>. Last modified 2017.

of our Saviour and his Beloved Disciple. They are the new faces of the Church. The Lord is entrusting his Church to them; he is giving the *Oneself* to the *Other*. They have communion with the Passion and Resurrection of Christ as they symbolize his Immaculate Mother and his Faithful servant. If the ones at the feet of the Cross are the same Ones in the Incarnational and missional moments, it means a radical change in the DNA of the Church, not in the sense of an addition of something missing, but in a Levinasian or Ricoeuran way, in that the *Oneself* identity flourishes hermeneutically and meta-categorically and in the phenomenon of the Other.¹⁹⁶ This atypical Golgotha scene happens with the witnessing of the Godhead, the Powers, and Dominions as Mveng sets the Cross on a cosmic background made of a cruciform compass and the sun with the moon in a composite diamond symbolism of fertility.

In the *Hekima Christus*' tryptic though (Figure 7), the Virgin Mother and the Beloved Disciple are present and interceding for creation. All of creation is symbolized in two images at the feet of the Lord: the lavish economic downtown and the biggest slum of Africa. In the real world these two locations are only separated from each other by less than seven miles. *One* is reflected in the face of the *Other* as well as the *Other* is mediatized in the face of *Oneself*.

Mveng seems to find in the arts the mystical *im-media* – the Body of Christ – to hold a new identity and mission for both the Africans and the Church. In terms of identity, they both are reborn in God's new grace. In terms of mission, Mveng details an extensive path

¹⁹⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, *ibid.*, 329

for both through authentic dialogue in Christ.¹⁹⁷ He says that Africa needs to overcome its “temple of wizards, fetishes, secret societies, horror rites, and exotic dances” that pretend to offer mirage salvation and instead turn towards what elevates humanity from the prison of misery.¹⁹⁸ This requires the affirmation of African values and culture, the resistance not to be dissolved into the hegemony of the Western empire, and in all, an openness to Christian universal culture. The Catholic Church needs to learn from the interior dynamism of the history of African traditional religions that lives together through crisis, renewal, mutual exchange, and synthesis.¹⁹⁹ In this school of dialogue, the comprehension of symbolism in African cultures is important. For Mveng, if we agree with the mystical presence of Christ in all nations (*Lumen Gentium*, n.7), we, therefore, can welcome the incommensurable imports of other cultures without the fear or the blame of paganism. He advocates for the introduction, for instance, of the “nocturnal psalmody in the Sacred Forest of the Hermits *Bê* of Togo in the Christian liturgy.”²⁰⁰ These non-Christian monks have been chanting traditional hymns for generations, centuries before the evangelisation in Togo.

Mveng preaches the Christology of indigenisation, citing the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* (n.58) to define his call for the new Christology. He says: “The Gospel can be presented by natives under a foreign mask. Indigenization wants to take this foreign

¹⁹⁷ Mveng, *L’Afrique dans l’Eglise*, 87-92.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 88, 91.

mask off the Gospel and the Church, so that Christ feels at home, and that in turn African can feel at home in the Church.”²⁰¹ This request, as we can see, is addressed to Africans. The burden is not on the foreigner missionary to build the Church in Africa. This mission belongs to the indigenous to let ‘Christ feel at home’ so that a new Church is born. The dialogue aims to end the anthropological poverty and the structural expropriation of the African and her/his continent.²⁰² Mveng’s Christ always appears in a mask (Figures 4 & 7), whether He is European, African, Asian or American, and so on. The Christ that Mveng painted in the *Hekima Christus* is not the same as the one of the *Uganda’s Martyrs*, with regard to their features as a whole. In the former, his massive body represents his dominion over the cosmos as the Ultimate One who triumphs over death; in the latter, his miniscule earthworm-body surrenders to God’s Light to solve the disparity of society’s brokenness. But in both polyptychs, as in the other depictions of the Incarnation by Mveng, Jesus-Christ remains of the same identity, noticeable through Mveng’s African mask of the Master of Initiation.

3.2- The Master of Initiation or Mveng’s Christological Mask

A comparison between the depictions of the ‘head’ of Jesus-Christ across Mveng’s edited and unedited works confirm that the artist keeps the same reference of the mask to identify Christ. This reference is the mask of the *Dan* culture, which is part of Ivory Coast

²⁰¹ Ibid., 99.

²⁰² Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation”, *ibid.*, 156-158.

in West Africa.²⁰³ This mask appears in dancing rituals and makes present the person of the Master of Initiation. If a mask is always needed in the incarnational embodiment of the divine, we must then ask, what does the Master of Initiation stand for?

3.2.1- The origin of the Master of Initiation analogy for Christ

While the *master of initiation* refers to the social role of connected and unconnected realities across cultures and continents, its analogy to Jesus' identity and mission as a Christological paradigm is linked first with Anselme Titianma Sanon, bishop of Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso), before being used by Mveng.²⁰⁴ Sanon defines initiation as:

progressive and sustaining acts of integration. It is offered to young people to prepare them for entry into the adult community. It is a social act of educational and political significance that has a religious value. It is a global system in which social experience implies complementary and essential pivots such as the cultural, the political and the religious.²⁰⁵

These three dimensions and the constitution of the initiation school as a system leads to the birth of the social Man and Woman. This initiation becomes an act of existence and the social categories of gender, age, class, rank, and family. Below is a diagram which represents the social structure of the *Bambara* or *Bobos* or *Sini* people as studied by Sanon (Figure 5). At the nucleus are the *sinikê* who are the non-initiated, in need of collective

²⁰³ Mveng, *L'Art et L'Artisanat Africains*, ibid., 90.

²⁰⁴ Cf. Anselme Titianma Sanon and René Luneau, *Enraciner L'évangile* (Paris: Cerf, 1982), 163. All the citations from this book are my own translation.

²⁰⁵ Sanon and Luneau, ibid., 105.

protection.²⁰⁶ The following figure illustrates the dynamism of a traditional society on the basis of initiation.

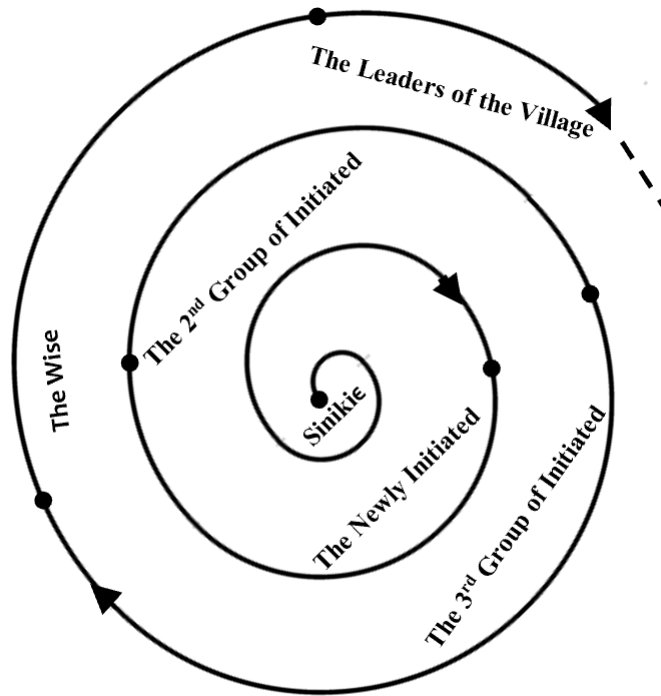


Figure 5. Sanon, *Social Dynamism of Initiation*, 1982. From *Enraciner dans l'Evangile*, 126.

Each group on this spiral is bound by a unique experience of initiation. This bond is sealed in a secret word through which people from the same year of initiation recognize and support each other. Life after initiation becomes an anamnesis. There can be more than three groups of the initiated before the group of the wise. Each group has an appropriate mask. The rite of initiation is a passage from the individual stage to the collective responsibility that evokes liberation from fear and ignorance, consecration and worthiness

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 126.

to keep community's eventual secrets. Sanon insists that initiation implies an ontological shift and a change of relationship with the community, with its secrets, and its mysteries. He shows how this model is common with the mystical testament of the biblical world. Sanon demonstrates the fundamental link between the Christian community of the Bible (Acts 17: 22-27; Jn 1; 4: 22, Gn 1) and the traditional culture of most Africans.²⁰⁷ He opposes their structure to modern societies' structure. At the deepest level of the traditional societies' structure is the achieved consecration in which the "doing" and the "being" meet, especially during a ritual celebration.²⁰⁸ It amounts to the highest status of the creative Logos. The biblical world shares similarities with the cultures that base their 'tree of knowledge' on the mystical.²⁰⁹ The table below displays the difference between modern societies and traditional societies.

traditional societies	Modern societies
Initiation ↓ Experience ↓ Quest ↓ Revelation ↓ Logic of the symbol ↓ Myth	Knowledge ↓ Science ↓ Conquest ↓ Explication ↓ Logic of the reason ↓ Reason

Figure 6. Sanon, *Consecration*, 1982. In *Enraciner dans l'Evangile*, 112.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 112.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 120.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 112.

In the oral tradition, the Initiate one learns that the “saying” creates and the “not saying” does not mean silence but death.²¹⁰ From our two tables, one can notice that the hierarchy consists not in the privilege of elevation or section from the community, but rather in the depth or ascension closer to the mystical and the bounds. Sanon finds, in the meeting between the African initiation tradition and the Christian baptismal initiation, two surprising resemblances that got resolved, unfortunately, into fear by the modern society during the course of evangelisation,²¹¹ because “the Christianity of the nineteenth century that evangelised us was one that lost its roots of symbolism.”²¹²

The two resemblances are, first, the symbolism between the tree of the Cross and the tree of the initiation; the procession of the *sinikiê* from the village to the place of initiation and the procession of the Christian neophytes to the altar; the imposition of the name that links the new Initiated to the ancestors or to the saints; the entrance to adult life through the learning of adequate wisdom; and the clothing with new vestments and the white baptismal garments. Second, at an ontic and sacramental level, both traditions facilitate, through the change of name the creation of a new Being and her or his incorporation to the community with responsibility and solidarity. Through the gift of a perpetual advisor or godfather/godmother, they believe that the adhesion to community requires prudent progression to a deeper level and the need of an elder who has proved herself or himself in

²¹⁰ Ibid., 119.

²¹¹ Ibid., 128.

²¹² Ibid., 194.

endurance and wisdom. Finally, this process of initiation offers the promise of salvation through funerals and eternal life.

A dialogue between the two traditional faiths and resembling root describes the important *koinonia* in which Sanon envisions the plenitude of Salvation that is already found fragmented in the *Bobos* culture and announced in the Scripture (Heb 1:1-3).²¹³ The figure of Jesus, the Chief, the Initiated One (Heb 7: 5, 9, 28) will be the one who heals that *division* or troubling resemblance and rejection (Is 53: 5). Sanon questions the possibility of Jesus taking the role of leader of Initiation because of his resemblance to the *Sini* or *Bambara* master and his divine transcendence to fulfil the role to perfection. What more perfect way to address Jesus than using his own nomination: “But you, do not have yourselves called master, as you are all brothers, and you have but one Master, Christ” (Matt 23:8).

Sanon finds in his native *Madarè* – the language of the *Bobos* people – pre-existing words that render the invisible God visible. In Theodore the Studite’s terms, it would be the circumscription of the Uncircumscribed. In *Mandarè*, the *ja* or *dia* is “the double that is clouded or can be clouded”; the Greek equivalent would be *eidon* for the ‘image’. Then there are the terms *bisigi* or *yeréworo* or *ven-no* that correspond to “the re-presentative that renders present, the authentic, the true born of the true, the transparent.”²¹⁴ The Greek word would be *eikon* for the ‘image’. He goes on, establishing many other surprising parallels

²¹³ Ibid., 136.

²¹⁴ Sanon, “Jesus Master of Initiation”, in *Faces Of Jesus In Africa*, Robert John Schreiter, ed., (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1991), 86.

between biblical culture, in the book of Isaiah and the New Covenant, and his *Sini* or *Bambara* genealogical tradition. One that is of interest here is the threefold dimension of the Chief, the *Vo*. He (or She sometimes) reflects three faces of the initiated *Elder* as: the elder brother (or child, or firstborn or the founder), the elder builder (or redeemer, or friend of the poor), and the Intercessor (or the master intercessor, the intercessor for the young, the *spear*).²¹⁵ The master of initiation is different from the village chief, but they both found and lead the community. With them, the religious chief and the land chief constitute the community's leadership. In the *bobos* social structure, shown in the Spiral above, the more wisdom is given to these four chiefs, by virtue of their probation and consecration, the more it becomes incumbent on them to grow society through interaction with other cultures and to protect the community, even at the price of their lives (Figure 5). The master of initiation, in particular, makes common cause with the least, the voiceless, the faceless. Christ, in taking the ancestral mask that protects the poor (Phil 2:7), is also the firstborn of the nameless face (Heb 2: 10-18) – the mediator between God and the human beings of the *Sini* and biblical traditions.

Through the Greek word *teleiosis* (fulfilment) of Hebrews 1:1-3 and 2:10, Sanon establishes “the most important evidence for his initiation Christology.”²¹⁶ Jesus, from the line of David, subjects himself to God's plan through the cultic rites of his people, through the community of brothers, whom Sanon takes for the Initiated. Jesus was initiated in his

²¹⁵ Sanon, “Jesus Master of Initiation”, *ibid.*, 88-89.

²¹⁶ Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Theology: Intercultural Hermeneutics*, Vol. 1 (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 194.

culture and masters its wisdom (Luke 2: 46-47; He 12:2). Through his life and the choice to die for the remission of the sins of his community, Jesus as the Son of God has demonstrated he has mastered the initiation dynamism – first in his Hebrew culture, second in the *Sini* or *bantu* cultures.²¹⁷ Sanon’s contribution does not stop at a descriptive narrative, but finds a theological meeting point through which Christ unites all cultures in becoming their legitimate *Master* and his *initiation* school is the sacrament where our imperfect beings are transfigured.

For Sanon, any African analogy of Christ requires two pillars rooted symbolically in faith: art and liturgy.²¹⁸ It means that the appropriate way to translate Jesus, the *Master of Initiation* calls for Christian iconography and celebrations. In a conversation he once had with an African nun who fashioned faces of Christ he stated: “‘How do you manage to get such beautiful things from this wood?’ I asked her. Her answer came at once and I have never been able to forget it. ‘I look at it until I see the face of Christ. Then I cut away the wood and there He is.’”²¹⁹

3.2.2- The heritage of the concept by Mveng

Although Mveng borrows the analogy of Jesus, the *Master of Initiation*, from Sanon, they both experience the process of initiation and the myth around it from their respective societies. For Mveng, the initiation in his culture is from the divine institution to promote

²¹⁷ Vogemann, *ibid.*, 195.

²¹⁸ Sanon, “Jesus Master of Initiation”, *ibid.*, 101.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

the passage from death to new life. It is the celebration of the victory of life over death.²²⁰

One foundational myth describes its beginning:

When Death had invaded mankind, the men, who became disconsolate, went to complain to God, saying, ‘God, Lord God, deliver us from this calamity. Why must the living man be devoured by Death?’ Then God looked at the man and said to him, ‘My child, you do not know what it is to live. Go and teach your sons that without death, life would no longer be life.’²²¹

The initiation sets disciples before their destiny and teaches them how to earn their freedom through unceasing commitments and combats. It is a prayer that allows the person to place herself or himself before God, the society, the world and oneself.²²² That exposure signifies the passage to adult life and its responsible implications. Thus, the initiated person becomes the creator of new life and protector of the life of God. This prayer, even if voiced individually, does not echo solitary personalities, but rather the communal mysticality of the whole society, and the church.²²³ Indeed, Mveng views in the cry of the Initiated one, the Christian prayer which opens to the whole Body of Christ. “In the rite of initiation, one learns that she or he is a project which she or he did not start” nor control.²²⁴

In Apocalypse 10: 8-11, the initiation goes through the manducation act. The neophyte is told: “Take and swallow it”. Reference can be drawn here to the Eucharist. Mveng makes a parallel with the *Ewondo* language spoken in southern Cameroon and Gabon. It portrays

²²⁰ Mveng, *L’Afrique dans l’Eglise*, 9.

²²¹ Mveng, *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 31.

²²² Ibid., 38.

²²³ Ibid., 41.

²²⁴ Mveng, *L’Afrique dans l’Eglise*, 17.

the acquisition of powers through the manducation.²²⁵ The master conferees the mystical gifts during the process of initiation through the manducation and brewing of secretive plants, portions, etc., or their interdiction, or their protection.²²⁶

In describing the fetish-convents of West Africa, Mveng evokes several monastery initiations that resemble in many ways the Palestinian life of Jesus and his disciples.²²⁷ In those non-Christian convents, three groups of adepts follow the teaching of the master: a small number of celibates for life, a temporary group of consecrated people, and the retreatants. They choose to share a simple life in work and mendicity, to obey their male or female master in all matters, and to practice purification through confession of sins, ablution and manducation of white porridge made by the master. The final stage of the process entails the naming. The master of initiation lays on a mat with the disciple, and when they both raise up, he says: “until now, you were only a minor; now that you have become an adult, I call you N...”²²⁸ Through the gift of the name, the disciple identifies himself or herself to the master, the model, as he or she lives according to the master’s life. In every step, the link with Jesus is bold. Mveng clearly sees in the initiatory culture of many African societies the effective point of dialogue and co-penetration with the biblical and Palestinian societies to which Jesus belongs. This dialogue serves as another confirmation of the mystical presence and action of the Logos’ action in all culture.

²²⁵ The manducation is a ritual act of eating. We have examples in the Bible: Ezekiel 3:1-4; Apocalypse 10:9.

²²⁶ Mveng, *L’Afrique dans l’Eglise*, 17-33.

²²⁷ Ibid., 46-50.

²²⁸ Ibid., 50.

Authentic means to capture this complex exchange-presence of Jesus, the *Master of Initiation* in the universal and particular Church passes for Mveng through artworks and especially the *mask*.

Conclusion

The Christology of Mveng is strongly expressed in his artworks. He deploys an articulated figure of Jesus as the *Master of Initiation*, which analogy was first used by Anselme Sanon. Mveng informs his prolific Christological paintings with the rich anthropology and spirituality of many African cultures with regards to the process and structure of initiation. He and Sanon find in both the Biblical culture and the African culture shared pillars of initiatory wisdom and *mystagogia* that can adopt Jesus as the ultimate Master, the model, the giver of life, the firstborn, the intercessor. The initiation is a rite, a passage. In the Ugandan culture for instance:

The meaning of this rite is that of a mystical alliance with the Spirit to which one is consecrated. This alliance is neither purely formal nor simply representative and scenic, nor legal and cold. It is consumed in the intimacy of the being; it is called trans-personalization. In fact, the identification with the model is not merely theoretical. It is practical and addresses the concreteness of existence. Henceforth the concern of the adept becomes the concern of his or her model.²²⁹

Initiation rites are pervasive in Africa, as well as in other traditional cultures. The analogies to the biblical context are compelling and can give birth to further studies. For now, we can commence reading of the *Master of Initiation*'s attributes.

²²⁹ Ibid., 50.



Figure 7. Engelbert Mveng, *Hekima Christus*, 1988. Hekima University College Chapel, Nairobi (KENYA).

CHAPTER IV: Mveng's *Master of Initiation* Depiction in the light of Theodore the Studite's Christology

Introduction

Our final step aims to focus on Theodore the Studite's ontological understanding of the incarnate Christ, as he exists as the *Master of Initiation* in Mveng's time and place. It is an effort to understand the universal Logos in a particular culture, while also adhering to a depiction of Christ in a particular context that enriches the universal discourse on the Christological epistemology.

Our study can be summarized with this conviction of Theodore the Studite:

If every image encompasses form [μορφή], shape [σχῆμα], appearance [εἶδος] and color [χρῶμα], Christ, then, must be in all of these; according to the scripture indeed, 'he took the form of a servant, he was seen to have the shape of man' (Phil 2:7) and he had a dishonourable and lowly appearance which indicates the bodily condition; as such he is portrayed in the very circumscription of his likeness.²³⁰

In Mveng's terms, the Christ who had been depicted by God, is one that had taken the condition of the poor – those whom rely on God's initiation for their salvation. Christ is a living figure that had been seen, touched, and heard with such concrete feelings and lived relationships that he continues to be announced and proclaimed to the nations (1 John 1:3). The accuracy of this experience justifies the act of iconography and the spirituality of the icons, because it circumscribes the divinity as it actualizes Christ. In this final chapter, we deal with these ideas within Mveng's icon of the *communicatio idiomatum*.

²³⁰ *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 11, PG 99: 393d

4.1- Through corporeity to the divine

The *communicatio idiomatum* allows the indivisible and unconfused exchange between the two natures of Christ. In the artwork, Christ's human nature is deified, and his divinity becomes humanized. How are the properties of uncircumscribability of the divine encompassed in the three-dimensioned circumscription of Mveng's artwork?²³¹

Theodore the Studite helps us understand Mveng's way of capturing the divinity, through his theory that the ontology of Christ can only be apprehended through the particularities of a portrayal, and that "generalities are [only] seen by intuition and by reason (*nous kai dianoia*)."²³² The Studite allows the depiction of a specific Christ to lead us to the union of His two essences. Art, in the African context, plays the role of communion between the spiritual and physical worlds.²³³ Let us now learn how this happens through the language of symbols and forms.

4.1.1- The symbolism

Herein, we address in Mveng's terms, different aspects of the image making, which Theodore the Studite calls 'divine activity.'²³⁴ This does not consist in an adaptation of Christianity to the African symbolism. For Mveng says that, "It is more a question of showing how this symbolism was really human and therefore nostalgic of the fullness

²³¹ *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 4, PG 99: 392b-c.

²³² *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 16, PG 99: 397a-c.

²³³ Robin Poyner and Roy Sieber, *African Art At The Harn Museum* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), xv.

²³⁴ *Antirrheticus* 3 Beta 5, PG 99: 420a.

brought to it by Christianity. It does not adapt to [Christianity], it fulfils in it.”²³⁵ The predominant theme in the symbolism, as we saw, is the dialectical fight between life and death.

The symbolism of color invokes a spiritual language from the aesthetical symbiosis of three major colors: the red for life, the white for death and the black for suffering.²³⁶ The light red or golden color corresponds to the abundance of life.²³⁷ The use of colors in religious art does not belong exclusively to the African traditions, but comes as a structure of the human maturation to the divine. The color white in Africa, used to conjure Death, also has immense powers to cure diseases. “New-born baths, care of the sick, conjuration of misfortunes never come without water sprinkled with white clay.”²³⁸ During the initiation rite, white is worn by the neophytes at their introduction to the new phase that trains them to defeat death. In the *Bapende* of Congo, for instance, the master of initiation whitens himself as a sign of communion with the ancestral spirits. The Transfiguration scene (Luke 9: 29) or the white Dove at the Baptism (Luke 3:22) of Jesus can be looked at prefiguring of his knighting to submit and conjure the powers of death. The color red celebrates life, especially human life, which centralizes the significance and fulfilment of the whole creation. This is the color of new mothers, the newly initiated, and the elderly who go through the seasoned re-initiation. The color black is the color of the night. Hence,

²³⁵ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 31.

²³⁶ Mveng, *L'Art et L'Artisanat Africains*, 50.

²³⁷ Mveng, “Interview”, *Hekima Review*, 69.

²³⁸ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 32.

Mveng implies that “it can be the hideaway of the Adversary on the lookout.”²³⁹ Black represents also the trial and the mystery. It calls for endurance in time of persecution and resistance in time of evil temptation. Two minor colors are employed in the African art as well: ochre yellow and green. The former conveys neutrality and helps the artist to paint a background, the dry leaves, and the ground. The latter represents the tree leaves and covers the initiated ones as a sign of victory. Overall, colors play the role of liturgy, and as such they partake in the prayer of the African.²⁴⁰

The symbol of the Mask recapitulates the whole of African art, according to Mveng.²⁴¹ “The mask, the universal face of humankind, animal or plant, is thus a liturgical garment.”²⁴² It accompanies man and woman everywhere during their celebrations, combat and other activities. The mask used during initiations differs from the ones used at funerals, during war, and during dance. Tribes and nations attribute different masks according to people’s functions within society. The mask craft, more than any other type of African iconography, develops the best of the African objective realism. An acute study of that objective realism reveals the four steps in the creation of the mask. There are the objectivation, the abstraction, the thematization, and the synthesis.²⁴³ The mask gathers the

²³⁹ Mveng, *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 32.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁴² Mveng, *L’Art et L’Artisanat Africains*, 40.

²⁴³ Mveng, *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 52-54.

finest of the African art shop with its majesty, simplicity and perfection.²⁴⁴ The mask also absorbs the dramatic combat of life with the mission of acting as creator and protector of creation. For instance, when one wears a mask of an animal, he or she performs a dance through which the spirit of the animal in symbiosis with the person reveals mystical history and links the animal with the whole tribe.²⁴⁵

In the depiction of Jesus, Mveng often uses the Mask that represents the *Master of Initiation* to signify Jesus' social function and divine identity. To those who crucify the *Master*, Mveng has made a correspondent mask, and he qualifies their social identity as follows: "The soldiers are black masks, a color of [dispatched] torture; it is the mask par excellence of executions with hollow eyes: they are the arm that strikes indiscriminately."²⁴⁶ With masks, Mveng distributes roles and capture the ontology of every personage of the Passion of the Logos in his book *Si... Quelqu'un...* Because of its ritual function, masks could only be produced by a specific group of initiated artists. After their fabrication, they were kept and presented during major ceremonies.²⁴⁷ Masks are made to capture the spirit, and during some ceremonies, they are not displayed for the spectator but for the Spirit to inhabit. Even though they can be familiar to initiated people, masks are not made to please or entertain the public's curiosity. They are rather made to *snare* the spirit, to *catch* God in matter, to circumscribe the divine. That is why sometimes,

²⁴⁴ Mveng, "Spiritualité et libération en Afrique", 464-467.

²⁴⁵ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 57.

²⁴⁶ Mveng, *Si... Quelqu'un...*, XI and "Note Liminaire".

²⁴⁷ Mveng, *L'Art et L'Artisanat Africains*, 91.

as Frank Willett explains, they are even hidden from the public; and during public rituals, they are placed on the head of the dancer and facing the sky. The mask thus becomes a ‘spirit-regarding-art’.²⁴⁸

4.1.2- The shapes

The universalized forms in Mveng’s painting and sculpture are obtained by meditating on the particulars. This methodology matches with Theodore the Studite’s assertion that the universals ‘are seen’ by the mind and the thought, and based on the observation of particulars’ properties.²⁴⁹ Theodore the Studite cites these properties as the medium that translates the uncircumscribed divinity into visible icon. The unexhaustive list of the icon properties is provided by Cattoi: “comprehension, quantity, quality, position, space, time, form, embodiment.”²⁵⁰ One could add also color, mask, music, dance and other cultural representations.

We have just named the four steps through which the mask ascends to the summum of African art shop. In each of these steps, an evolution is also observed in the divinization of the matter through the maturation of form.²⁵¹ In the first step, the moment ‘O’ of Mveng, is the objectivation or Greek *mimesis*. The realist artist conceives his work through the imitation of nature. A cross can be painted by the intersection of two bold lines. The second

²⁴⁸ Frank Willett, *African Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 161-62.

²⁴⁹ *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 16, PG 99: 397a-c.

²⁵⁰ Cattoi, *ibid.*, 92. *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 13, PG 99: 396a-b.

²⁵¹ Mveng, *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 53-55.

step extracts only the essential Line of the object and is called the “L”. Here, the artist finds himself at a moment of abstraction, which is a moment of aesthetical transcendence. The third step is called the thematization or the ‘Th’. From the essential line, a Motif (pattern) is generated. Elsewhere, Mveng calls this step ‘M’.²⁵² Thus the ‘Th’ equals to the ‘M’. It is a moment where the sign is a symbol as well as scripture because of its mobility. The fourth step is the ‘C’, the composition. It organizes the synthesis where the artist reveals himself as creator. It is a page of scriptures.

The creation of an African Christological icon for Mveng takes the path of an objective realism that evolves in linear abstraction and the composition of a motif. The schema would be from ‘O’ to ‘L’, from ‘L’ to ‘M’, from ‘M’ to ‘C’, progressively. At once, we would have:

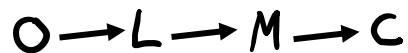


Figure 8. Mveng, *Laws of Aesthetic Creation*, 1964.
In *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 55.

Mveng acknowledges that these steps are not a *sine qua non* condition of African iconography. They are constant and one previous step can be assumed by the following. The creation ‘C’ can result from the objectivation and thematization, without a clear

²⁵² Mveng, *L'Art et L'Artisanat Africains*, 26.

moment of extraction of motif or abstraction.²⁵³ In that case, the ‘M’ swallows the ‘L’ as its intermediary. We can have different processes to ‘C’:

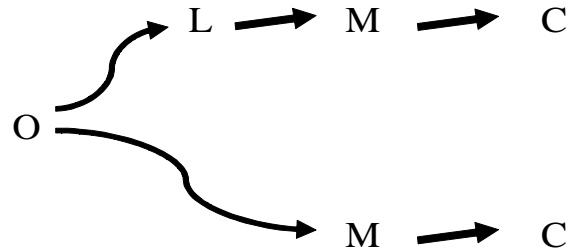


Fig. 8.1. Mveng, *Laws of Aesthetic Creation*, details.

The second pattern equals the story we have already alluded to between Anselm Sanon and the artist nun. She seems to have integrated the “L” moment in the “M”, as an instrument of the divine inspiration. Sanon, in a dialogue with the nun, asked “‘How do you manage to get such beautiful things from this wood?’ Her answer came at once. ‘I look at it until I see the face of Christ. Then I cut away the wood and there He is.’”²⁵⁴

The ‘M’ or ‘Th’ step is a moment of the African artistic alphabet. African motifs (patterns) hold various categories that realize the Studite’s circumscription of the divine: inclusion, quantity, quality, posture, places, times, shapes, bodies.²⁵⁵ The African artists in their large majority, especially at the time of Mveng, define themselves as religious

²⁵³ Mveng, *L’art et l’Artisanat Africains*, 26.

²⁵⁴ Sanon, “Jesus Master of Initiation”, *ibid.*, 100.

²⁵⁵ Tollefsen, *ibid.*, 38. *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 13, PG 99: 396a-b.

servants. Art offers a means to reach God, a space for celebration.²⁵⁶ In his book *Black Art, Christian Art?*, Mveng details the actualization of African artistic alphabet and the faction of priestly vestments.²⁵⁷ We find the same use of the same motif in the paintings of Christ to consecrate his harmony with the African community and with the cosmos.

For instance, we notice the abundant use of spiral lines in Mveng's painting, either on Jesus' forehead like in the *Nunc Dimittis* (Figure 3), or in the symbol of the globe, like in the *Uganda's Martyrs*. The spiral is inspired by the snail or from ants' activity. According to Mveng, it symbolizes variety. By the mimesis, the artist envisions the collective solidarity of the community of ants in achieving a great work out of a union of forces.²⁵⁸ In the course of abstraction, the elementary stage generates three types of figures: the circle, the rectangle and the triangle, each of them will have two forms of "C": the closed radical synthesis and the opened radical synthesis. They are called radical because they emerge from a core element, which we can call here God as their source. Lines tells the human story, the world story, the global harmony not only for the gaze of the aesthetic but also for the amplification of creative liberty.²⁵⁹ The following figure displays these syntheses.

²⁵⁶ Frank Willett, *ibid.*, 155-56

²⁵⁷ Mveng, *Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?*, 73ff.

²⁵⁸ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 62.

²⁵⁹ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 97.

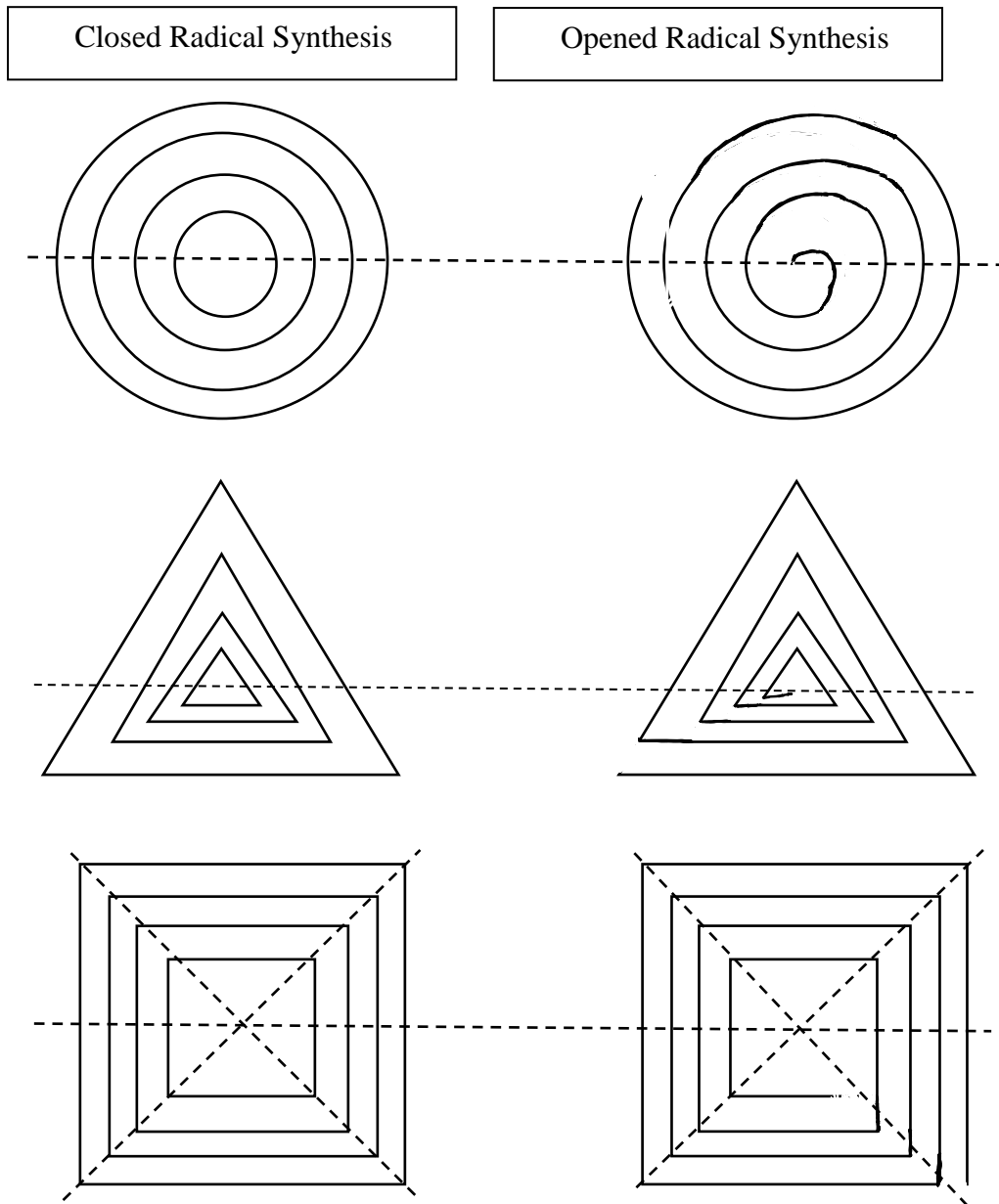


Figure 9. Mveng, *Radical Synthesis*, 1964. In *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 99.

The artistic alphabet does not generate uniform meanings. Mveng says that, “A sign bears several messages.”²⁶⁰ The opened radical synthesis of the triangle and the rectangle symbolizes the royalty and the dominion in many cultures because of the reference to the ancient serpent. The people of *Ouidah* in Benin or *Bamoun* in Cameroon adore the Piton or Serpent in general. And yet its sign holds the double meaning of fear and protection. These myriad meanings of the serpent are also corroborated by the biblical literature. In the book of Genesis, the Serpent is the Tempter (Gn 3:1ff), while in Numbers, the Brazen Serpent symbolizes salvation (Numb 21:7-9). When Mveng incorporates the concentric figures in his art, he intends to express the royal power of Christ or the priest vestment.²⁶¹ The legend *Bamoun* tells that king Nachare, their funder, gained his power and won battles through the help of the Serpent. Mveng uses this complex sign to portray peace and victory.²⁶²

Two other forms that help translate the divinity of Christ in Mveng’s iconography are the cross and the spear or arrow (Figures 10 & 11). The cross is often the absence-presence of the Mveng’s crucifixion painting. In the *Hekima Christus* or the *Uganda’s Martyr* for instance, he chooses to consume the cross in the body of Christ. When Mveng pictures the Cross, the wood of Salvation, he often uses the junction of either four *kola* (cola) fruits, or four cowries (Figure 10). The *kola* fruit is incorporated in the prenuptial ceremony and is among the dowry. The groom and the bride consume *kola* and offer it to their in-laws. Its

²⁶⁰ Mveng, *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 105.

²⁶¹ Mveng, *Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?*, Appendix n10.

²⁶² Mveng, *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 58.

importance in transnational trade appears as early as the first millennium.²⁶³ As such, it symbolizes friendship and fidelity in many African cultures. With reference to the passion, the *kola* fruit tastes bitter. The African tradition uses it during the fasting ritual to realise the progress in keeping away from tasty food and defeating evil. The dialectic is set.²⁶⁴ The *kola Cross* – shown in the following figure – encompasses the life, suffering and resurrection of Christ. For Mveng, the act of privation leads to the celebration of the eternal Banquet.

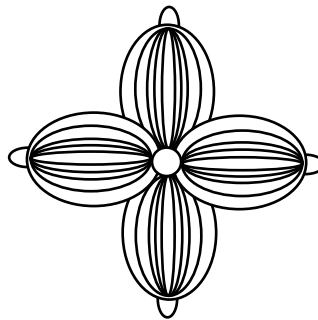


Figure 10. Mveng, *Kola Cross* or *Cosmic Cross*, 1964/1967. In *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 64; and *Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?*, Appendix 19.

The metaphor of the cowrie-Cross has a more complex meaning. It represents the stars and the moon in the paintings of the *Nativity*, the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, the *Adoration of the Magi*,²⁶⁵ and is used in the motif of local chasubles.²⁶⁶ Cowrie in traditional society

²⁶³ Werner Gillon, *ibid.*, 138, 169.

²⁶⁴ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 64. Mveng, *Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?*, Appendix n19.

²⁶⁵ Mveng, *Lève-toi, Amie, Viens*, *ibid.*, III, IV and VI.

²⁶⁶ Mveng, *Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?*, Appendix n16.

serves as the instrument of exchange (i.e. money). It forms the evolution in human relationship and informs the moment of trade. The cowrie-Cross in the *Adoration of the Magi* painting celebrates the shining activities that bring us together and lead our journey. The bodiless Logos is our treasure – the ultimate value of our exchanges. But Mveng also insists on the cowrie’s ability to pay the ransom. Based on John 1: 4, 5 and 12, he demonstrates how in the cowrie-Cross, Christ lays down his life and pays through that sacrifice the ransom that makes us ‘Children of God’ and sharers of the life of God.²⁶⁷ The Christology of the ransom that has been developed by many theologians holds on the dialectic of the debtor and the guilty present in many cultures.²⁶⁸ It is no surprise that in German language, the same word, *Schuld*, means both, the debt and the guilt.²⁶⁹

The form of the spear, or arrow or palm branches have a very significant meaning, too. We have a representation of its form in the following figure.

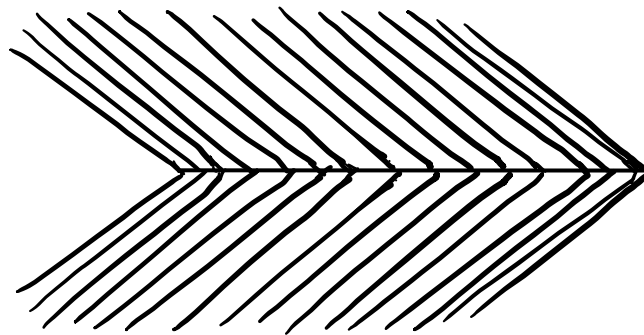


Figure 11. Mveng, *The Barb*, 1964. In *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 65.

²⁶⁷ Mveng, *Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?*, Appendix n16.

²⁶⁸ Read: Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext, 2011); Kathryn Tanner, *Economy Of Grace* Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2005; David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2012).

²⁶⁹ IIsup Ahn, *Just Debt* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), 19.

We have already seen how Mveng's own history connects to this very sign and how his birth village name '*Ngoulemakon*' means 'by the power of spears'. In the *Hekima Christus* (Figure 7), Mveng uses it abundantly. As an object of war, its realization demands from the black-smith patience, meditation and expertise, its evocation materialises the truth and confidence in victory. It chants the path to peace, as Mveng exults with the Psalmist: "The just shall flourish like the palm tree, shall grow like a cedar of Lebanon" (Ps 92:13).²⁷⁰ Forms do not only celebrate the symbiosis between humankind and nature but through them, as they acknowledge the circumscribed presence of God.

4.2- *Hekima Christus*: Jesus as an Initiatory Master

Theodore the Studite, as we can recall, views the universality as the result of contemplation of the particular depiction of Christ. We have, in the previous chapter, elevated the circumscribed analogy of the *Master of Initiation* to the level of the universality and the transcendence. Now, we want to focus on the painting of Christ, the *Hekima Christus*, and to learn how Mveng uses the universalised concept of the *Master of Initiation* to circumscribe the divine being and mission of Christ for the Church. In short, we are going to appreciate how Theodore the Studite's reading of the icon properties – like the symbols and the shapes – makes evident the *likeness* between the Logos we contemplate in the Scripture and the Mveng's *Hekima Christus*.

²⁷⁰ Mveng, *Art Nègre, Art Chrétien?*, Appendix n17.

4.2.1- *Hekima Christus* assessment

This fresco does not turn away from the color symphony we have already seen, but exemplifies it perfectly. It also integrates several motifs we have already studied. One new motif appears in the use of the color *blue* which is more decorative and applied to products, architecture, water, and sky. Mveng does not mention it among the major African colors. He suggests that a variety of colors constitutes enriching differences across cultures.²⁷¹

Although a fresco is a whole as far as its theology is concerned, we can gradually understand *Hekima Christus*' meaning by proceeding step by step through Mveng's triptych. It can be divided into five sub-pieces. At the far right and left, the first and fifth positions, the viewer observes two identical panels of the abstractive shapes of palm tree branches or spears (Figure 7 & 11). At the adjacent pieces, on the second and fourth positions, we have the painting of the Multiplication of Loaves and the Wedding feast of Cana, respectively. In the centre, at the third position, we admire the painting of the Death and the Resurrection of Jesus.

The contemplation of two adjacent pieces – the second and fourth panels – informs the viewer on the biblical textual ground of Mveng. The Wedding of Cana has the Gospel of John as its unique source. Hence, Mveng' whole *Hekima Christus* emerges from the Fourth Evangelist as its inspirational source: The Wedding at Cana in John 2:1-12, The Multiplication of loaves in John 6: 1-71 and The Lord's Passion in John 19 – 20.

²⁷¹ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 31-32.

The certitude that Mveng favours the Johannine narrative offers a broader analysis. For instance, we know that this is not only painting about the multiplication of loaves but also about the institution of the Eucharist. In John's gospel, the Eucharist can *be read* at the multiplication of loaves (in chapter six). Indeed, following that 'sign' of multiplication, Jesus references to Himself as the Bread of life, saying: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him" (John 6:56). Based on the Johannine text, Mveng is symbolizing the 'sign' of Eucharist. Each of the participants is not holding just one or two loaves enough for a meal. Instead, each of the guests holds a brim-full basket of loaves, a sign of the overflowing grace of the Eucharist. The initiation ritual of manducation elevates Christ at the office of the master and does so to perfection since the very Food to be eaten is his own Body. That is why Mveng views in Christianity the fulfilment of something that has already been happening in African cultures and other cultures.

The central piece portrays a dominant crucified Jesus in golden (or light red) color of royalty, reflecting his divinity and the hope he announces. Unlike in the Cana Wedding and at the Multiplication of loaves, where Jesus' halo surrounds the head, here the halo envelops the whole person of Jesus. This display of abundant holiness corresponds to the special epiphany of the resurrection about Jesus' divinity. At the same time, Mveng keeps the contrast of death with life. Death appears here through his nailed arms outstretched and his crossed nailed feet. But we know Jesus is alive and risen because Mveng, amongst all the signs of death, maintains Jesus' open eyes and the large golden halo. At the Lord's feet, his mother and the Beloved disciple are united in a mourning sorrow – indicated by their black and white clothing – while standing as witnesses of his resurrection – indicated by

the use of red. Clearly, for Mveng, we cannot access the resurrection without accepting the Passion.

Moreover, the white and blue background connects the paschal mystery to the effective life of the citizens of Nairobi. Under the feet of Jesus and behind Mary is painted the downtown of Nairobi with its flourishing business centres. One of the buildings is the majestic Kenya International Commercial Centre (KICC), one of the highest buildings of the entire country, showing an outstanding image of the developing country. Opposed to that at the feet of Beloved Disciple, Mveng portrays Kibera, the second biggest slum of Africa. It is important to keep in mind that both KICC and Kibera are located in the capital city of Nairobi and separated by about five miles. From the slum, one can either admire or curse the skyscrapers of the city. Thereby, Mveng actualize the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus in our African cities (Luke 16: 19-31).

In the entire fresco, only Jesus has his eyes open. The other personages have their sight lowered or eyes closed. This is the sign that Christ is the Master of Initiation; he is the omniscient who reveals his transcendence to Nathanael and the Samaritan woman (John 1:48; 4:29); he bears life and provides the life for others. Mveng explains: “The attitude of eyes closed, and eyes down is a traditional African attitude in front of the leader.”²⁷² The master of Initiation and the Messiah or the Rabbi (Matt 23:8.10) share the same functional identity across the African and Jewish cultures.

²⁷² Engelbert. “Interview”, *Hekima Review*, 69.

One important note on the semiology of this painting is the importance of the mask, under which Mveng circumscribes the divinity of the Logos (Figure 4). As we have mentioned, this use of a mask which centralizes the best of African iconography creates the meeting point between Mveng and Theodore the Studite. Indeed, in allowing for Christ to be depicted through this particular *Sini* mask by human beings, the divine Son of God opens the African Master of Initiation to His universality.²⁷³ He is embodied through Mveng's artwork and divinizes it.

The mask of Christ brings together at once, human, animal and vegetal beings into God. That is why the act of iconography is considered by both the Studite and Mveng as holy as a divine mission. Artworks are not a neutral enterprise. More than an apprenticeship, for Mveng it requires faith and membership in a faith tradition.²⁷⁴ Christ, the Master of Initiation, does not unite the people of the *Sini* culture only; he transcends all cultures to speak to and save human society. This act of transcendence and universality is carried out by the mask.²⁷⁵ Jesus is the Mediator. With his open eyes in the mask, Jesus makes the invisible visible. Furthermore, in using a cultural *Dan* symbol in Christian art, Mveng is evangelizing the 'pagan' culture with due respect. The mask becomes a liturgical vestment and plays a priestly role.²⁷⁶ Mveng wrote:

One must know that the mask is a liturgical vestment. And it is precisely because of its liturgical role that the mask has become so foreign to

²⁷³ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 57.

²⁷⁴ Mveng, *L'Art et l'Artisanat Africains*, 90.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁷⁶ Mveng, *L'Art d'Afrique Noire*, 104.

Christians. Because it is one of the expressions of African art that the missionary identified with the Fetish, with such virulence that for the average Christian the mask is a symbol of paganism. But it is in the Christianization of the mask that we see inculturation, that is to say, the access to an African Christian language.²⁷⁷

Mveng implies that even with African symbolism, Christ does not cease to be a mystery to Africans, not only because of their *an-alphabetisation* to their own artistic language but because the liturgy as a prayer of circumscription of the divine opens the realm of the Unknown One, the Incarnated Logos. For Mveng, our relationship to artwork is always a prayer, and a prayer occurs in a context.²⁷⁸

4.2.2- Christological relevance of *Hekima Christus*: Christ the Mediator for Social Justice

In the relation ‘Prototype-Image’ of Christ, Theodore establishes that principle of *autoaletheia* (truth in itself) for the Image to contain the likeness of the Prototype. It means that the image carries the memory of the Prototype: anamnesis.²⁷⁹ “To disclose the prototype means to discover its meaning from the reading of the image.”²⁸⁰ In other words, Jesus of Nazareth is equal to the Second Person of the Trinity as its prototype, and an icon of him should carry this memory throughout its contemplation. *Hekima Christ* would be

²⁷⁷ Engelbert. “Interview”, *Hekima Review*, 69.

²⁷⁸ Mveng, *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 12-25.

²⁷⁹ *Antirrheticus* 3 Beta 4, PG 99: 417d.

²⁸⁰ Tollefsen, *ibid.*, 136.

an authentic icon of the Prototype if its ‘reading’ celebrates the likeness of the One of the Scripture.

The edict, “Do this in memory of me” (1 Cor 11:24), leaves us with the duty to approach now the enhypostasis of *Hekima Christus*, and, in an anamnestic act, to read the Incarnated Son of Man.²⁸¹ For the Studite as for Mveng, there should be a correspondence between both.

The concern for social justice is present in the entire life of Engelbert Mveng. His assassination is viewed by many as a sign of his engagement in social change and of his fights against political and exoteric groups. Justice is strewn in all his works. Moreover, it defines his identity as Christian, because Jesus describes himself as the King of Justice, the bearer of peace (Luke 4:18-19). In this fresco of *Hekima Christus*, each of the pieces has something particular to tell us about evangelic value.

The abstract panels (the first and fifth sub-pieces) are made of spears, which are faith instruments of fighting and for protection, liberation, and decolonisation. In different circumstances, Jesus alludes to the use of evangelical spears to free the human being from the prison of spiritual slavery and social injustice: Matt 10:34, Luke 22:36, and John 18:11. These panels also stand for branches of a palm tree. In the Gospel of John, palm branches are mentioned to celebrate the glorious entry of the Messiah in Jerusalem (John 12:13ff). These palms foresee what is happening in the central sub-piece – the third painting. This

²⁸¹ *Antirrheticus* 1:10, PG 99: 340 a-d.

is why Mveng uses repetitively progressive colors from the light red to the red, and the dark-red, to emphasise then permanent tension between suffering and hope, life and death.

In the multiplication of loaves sub-painting, Jesus is in front and performing the miracle, feeding the hungry with the abundance of his life. In the Gospel of John, the miracle starts the discourse on the Bread of Life. The people seek Jesus for earthy bread, but Jesus teaches them that he is the eternal Bread. We are amid the mystery of table fellowship. Mveng's fresco imaged Jesus as the giver of eternal life, as the mediator who shares the life of the Father with us. But what is painted here enlarges the Scriptural textuality. In the Gospel, only one woman, the Mother of Jesus, is mentioned as the feminine presence at the Wedding of Cana, while we all know that from a traditional social setting, like in Africa or the one in which Jesus lived, a wedding gives a lot of visibility and participation to women. Thus, Mveng paints more than one feminine presence. Here is his take:

Indeed, the role of women in the miracle of Cana is a reading of the Gospel that I allow myself, and I believe it is not only from the imagination. The phenomenon of rarely mentioning women in the Gospels is due to the culture of the time that misrepresented the presence of the woman even when she is there. It is therefore unimaginable for us that women have not helped in the preparation of the paschal meal, for example. In the case of water turned into wine, in an African context, it is the women actually who would have fetched the water. Their function in society is as mothers and nurturers. It is this function that I wanted to make the woman play in this miracle... I do not know if they were asked to fetch water, per se, but in any case, unquestionably, they prepared the meal.²⁸²

Mveng has an astonishing iconic theology of woman that elevates the female gender to dignity, in an outrageously masculine Africa that silently watches the educational denial,

²⁸² Engelbert. "Interview", *Hekima Review*, 65-66.

the economic exclusion, the power discrimination, the slavery, the rape and murder of the majority of its daughters and mothers, who represent more than half of its population. In this painting, Mveng operates within the truth principle that Theodore insists on in the relation Prototype-Image. Jesus, the one who reintegrates women (John 8:1-11), restores their divine presence-silence (Luke 8:43), befriends them (Luke 10:38-42), heals their infirmity and rises them from the death (Luke 8:54), is in truth equal to the one who inspires the painting of *Hekima Christus*, and thus allows him to incrust the faces of women. The cry for gender dignity sounds not only as a call to African, but is a universal appeal to actualize the gospel. Art makes immemorable what the Lord himself has elected in choosing first a woman to bear his Incarnation and to witness his Resurrection. When Jesus feeds his flock, he blesses everyone without discrimination. But when our society records the receivers of Christ's grace, it often omits to recognize the presence of women (Matt 14:21; Mk 6:44). In painting the *Hekima Christus*, women are fully mentioned. This confirms that Mveng actualises the *likeness* of 'icon-prototype' relationship in his work.

The Cana miracle is the first Sign of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel. Mveng's intention here does not only show Jesus being sensitive to a bridegroom and avoid his humiliation but also shows us Jesus as the master who provides the brewage that achieves the revelation of himself as Son of God. The wine at the table of Cana, for the evangelist as for our African artist, is the wine at the table of Eucharist. In the two side images (the panels two and four) each personage is given plenty by Jesus. The mediator, Jesus, addresses his message of conversion to each and every one of us. In the view of Mveng, what Jesus brings to the world, especially in Africa, is the abundance, that is Himself as Eucharist.

The central panel, on the Crucified Risen Christ, unifies Mveng's whole altarpiece. The 'opened eyes' Christ, whose attitude corresponds to the Master of Initiation, is also the "Kyrios, the master of life. But at the same time, opened-eyes, Christ is questioning."²⁸³ Jesus, the master of initiation, reconciles the Nairobi business centres and Kibera slum, the rich and the poor. He feeds the wealthy and the lonely. His Eucharist invites all. It is because of such inclusiveness that the question of social justice should become a concern for all. The message of the Gospel in the *Hekima Christus* builds the broken bridge on the unjust gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the haves-not. Mary and John are not only contemplating the Risen One; they are also interceding on behalf of our cities. This is the role Mveng gives to Mary and the Beloved Disciple.

For Mveng, Jesus belongs to every culture, and his gospel speaks to all realities as it challenges them. The Son of Man who becomes circumscribed in the Palestinian culture shares the human condition and for that reason, Africans, as well as all nations, live from his life, feel the struggle of his passion and enjoy the light of his resurrection. That is why Mveng could envision the African mask to be a receptacle of his divinity. Moreover, the social injustice in the world and represented by Mveng with KICC and Kibera takes place with the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Mveng shows us the injustices in our societies, hunger and human humiliation, hate speeches, sexism, violence, racism, betrayal, indifference, etc., which constitute the nails and crown of thorns of Jesus. In the hope and joy of his resurrection, he takes us back to the communion with the divine.

²⁸³ Engelbert. "Interview", *Hekima Review*, 69.

Conclusion

For Theodore the Studite, the icon reveals the divine circumscription in the incarnation, not only as a universal reality but through the details of the iconography. It means that in an image of Christ, the divine Logos becomes present through the colors, the forms, the symbolism, etc.²⁸⁴ Subsequently, the Studite defends universalism by way of particularity. In so doing, he becomes a fervent defender of iconography and sets a ground for Mveng's complex iconic Christology. Capturing the divinity through the mere symbolism and form of the matter has been the goal of this last chapter. It sought to build a Christological ontology and epistemology based on the understanding of the analogy of the *master of initiation*, that opens Mveng's art to universalism. Christ is the foundation that gives sense to a Christianized African culture, and so, he allows the work of reconciliation to take place. The dialectic of divine embodiment make life transcend death, hope overcomes trials, and salvation shines upon damnation. This dialectic in Mveng artwork, especially the *Hekima Christus* of 1994, emerges through colors, synthesis of shapes and the majesty of the mask. God's incarnation is God's image. Theodore defends it. Mveng paints it.

²⁸⁴ *Antirrheticus* 3 Alpha 11, PG 99: 393d.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Throughout the history of faith, Christian iconoclasm has periodically denied the possibility of icons and other human artworks to represent the divine. Such denial is challenged by this thesis based on the Christological doctrine of an eighth century theologian and the iconographic engagement of a contemporary African. Thus, our work defends how Theodore the Studite's iconophile theology provides foundations for Mveng's depiction of Jesus in a particular African milieu as the *Master of Initiation*. It also allows us to apprehend the eternal Logos in Mveng's naming of Jesus for a universal contemplation.

The assessment of such a complex topic that covers a large period has led us to deploy a methodology that mainly navigates between analytic and homiletical approaches, comparative and genealogical procedures. In doing so, we have been able to understand: the Christological and philosophical iconic controversies; uncover the cultural and social history of religious images; access the symbol and messages of African arts; and formulate a discourse that offers Christian iconography and icon veneration as the best way to celebrate the incarnated God in the universe and in our specific communities.

With this methodology, we have built the path of our iconophile and incarnational journey in four chapters. First, the Byzantine iconoclasm and its survival in our current church provides us the genealogy of the iconic controversy with its three crises within Christianity. Second, the Christology of Theodore the Studite, which develops an iconophile defense for the veneration of religious images in Christian life, provides foundations for the circumscribability of Logos. Third, the art school of Mveng which

portrays an African face of Jesus as the *Master of Initiation*. Finally, the reassessment of Mveng's artistic symbolism in dialogue with the Studite's doctrine on divine corporeity.

The Byzantine iconoclasts did not tolerate any valid *mystērion* of the divine, except for the Eucharist, the cross, the sacred vessels, and the Scriptures.²⁸⁵ Their most compelling argument is found in the Bible to come from divine prohibition: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.” (Exodus 20:4). Other iconoclasts rely on the early Fathers, like Basil and Origen. Origenism, for instance, develops a contempt for matter and downplays the possibility of an eschatological redemption for the world as physics. Therefore, the icon can be seen as fallen matter that is unfit for divine representation. On a philosophical level, the critics of anthropomorphism and the Platonist degradation toward the sensible cosmos have served to claim God's uncircumscribability. In history, iconoclasm has given rise to additional aniconic arguments. In the Byzantine empire, it was because of the military constraint for unity amidst Islamic influences and Persian invasion; in the Western Christendom of the Middle Age, it was because of the misinterpretation of the iconophile Nicene *Acta* of 787 and the Thomistic aesthetic criteria; during the Reformation, it was additionally because of the artistic impact of the Renaissance on Christian art and clericalism; in the twentieth century that preceded the Second Vatican Council, the nostalgia of classicism against the Enlightenment and Marxist discourse led to an iconophile regression within Christianity.

²⁸⁵ *Opus Caroli Regis contra synodum*, II, 27-30.

Against this trajectory, Theodore the Studite dedicated his life and many of his writings – especially the Three *Antirrhetici* – to the defense of icons and the Church during the second iconoclast crisis in Byzantium (814-843). His main iconophile doctrine responds to the iconoclasts’ central point: the scriptural prohibition. Relying on his master, John Damascene, Theodore asserts that God who forbids the making of images is also the first one to permit iconography by taking flesh and subjugating to human history. The incarnation of the Logos becomes the blessing moment of the divine icon. In Damascene, Theodore also finds the proper apologetic attitude towards the icon: It is veneration. This founds the Studite’s Christology of the Image and the Prototype. The circumscribability of the first and the uncircumscribability of the second are not essences in Christ’s composite subjectivity, but properties that preserve each other. Theodore receives the notion of composite subjectivity from Maximos the Confessor, and uses it to defend the ontological relationship between Christ, the Logos or the Prototype, and his icon. As we have seen, Christ’s image always subsists (*hyphestōsan*) in Christ’s prototype in the sense that one is always followed with one’s own shadow.²⁸⁶ For Theodore, then, iconography is the appropriate way to celebrate the presence of the divine in our midst.

In the same line, Engelbert Mveng dedicated his life to the defense of African art’s participation in Christianity. He views African iconography as “a cosmic liturgy and religious language.”²⁸⁷ The conversion to Christianity becomes the fulfilment of a natural tendency to the religiosity of African art. Moreover, Mveng approaches the Palestinian

²⁸⁶ *Antirrheticus* III, Delta 2.

²⁸⁷ This is the subtitle of his book: *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, *ibid.*.

Jesus-Christ with a very familiar cultural understanding. Like his contemporary Anselme Sanon, Mveng believes Jesus went through the process of cultural initiation necessary to acquire wisdom and that he mastered this process to its perfection. So, both Sanon and Mveng call Jesus the *Master of Initiation*. Sanon's study of the world in the Scripture finds that Jesus does not only demonstrate an extraordinary possession of wisdom through his initiation school, but as the divine Saviour, he is the Initiation itself, the ultimate Wisdom of the Father and the Mediator. In depicting Jesus, Mveng finds no better symbol than the *mask* that is worn by the master of initiation in the *Sini* or *Bambara* culture. The mask represents the finest of African art. It combines sculpture, painting, music, and history; it transmits the divine into the human and transports the human into the divine.

Theodore the Studite does not only defend artistic representation to be the appropriate means to celebrate God, but he invests the corporeity of arts in its categories (shapes, colors, etc.) to be the circumscription that encompasses the dialectic of God becoming man in Christ. In the same way, we can approach the particularity of Mveng's depiction of Jesus as the *Master of initiation* to be the perfect analogy for a universal Christianity. The particularity with Theodore and Mveng becomes the vector of universality. In the categories of Mveng's colors, for instance, we see the perpetual tension between light and darkness, suffering and peace, and the victory of life over death. Mveng's art pieces, such as the *Hekima Christus* or the *Mural* of the Holy Angels Catholic (Figure 2), are contextual. Nevertheless, in their depiction of Jesus as the *Master of initiation*, they become universal.

Theodore the Studite and Mveng are concerned with our artistic catechumenate; they both despise icon ignorance and advocate education to art.²⁸⁸ This work is a response to their call. It invites to the protection and the development of the artistic diversity in Christian life and celebrations. Maybe, by learning to find God in our artistic expressions, we will come to find Him in ourselves, indiscriminately of our traditions, genders, colors, and social and religious status, but rather within all of them. Categories become vectors of unity and incarnational blessings towards our universality in God.

²⁸⁸ Cf. Epistula, 81. 26-8; and *Parva Catechesis* 118. 299. Cf. Engelbert. “Interview”, *Hekima Review*, 67; *L’Art et l’Artisanat Africains*, 143-147; *L’Art d’Afrique Noire*, 10.

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